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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Victoria Marcheski

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Teacher Perceptions of Their Readiness for Teaching Social Skills to Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

by

Victoria Marcheski

MA, University of Mount Olive, 2018

BS, University of Mount Olive, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2022

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how special and general education teachers in New Jersey struggle to implement social skills instruction to students with moderate to severe autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The problem addressed in this study was that K-12 teachers in New Jersey are challenged to implement instructional strategies to support the social development of students with moderate to severe ASD. The conceptual framework guiding this work was the universal design for transition, based upon blending universal design for learning tenets and transitional outcomes for students with disabilities. The research question explored how K-12 special and general teachers within New Jersey implemented instructional strategies for students with ASD. This study was a basic qualitative design that utilized open-ended interviews analyzed with open, axial, and thematic coding analysis. Results from this study indicated four significant barriers to successfully implementing transitional social skills within the classroom setting: a lack of understanding of the nature of ASD, inadequate administrative support, insufficient training, and ineffective collaboration with the CST. Positive social change can be seen by identifying current gaps in educational practice within the transitional process for students with ASD and increased awareness of obstacles that preclude effective implementation of transitionary social skills within K-12 classrooms.

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Dedication

This study is, first and foremost, dedicated to my husband, Robert Marcheski, who has worked side by side with me for over 15 years and pushed me always to achieve my goals in life. He has been a true partner in life and is my biggest cheerleader. This study is also dedicated to my three children. Scott is my eldest, and his diagnosis of ASD at the age of seven pushed me to learn more about the disorder and begin my journey towards advocacy for students. Lauchlan, my middle child, always pushes me to be the best I can be in all aspects of life. His passion for learning and equity helped me see the changes I can be a part of in life. Ginny, my youngest, is my role model. She was diagnosed with severe ASD, and life is extremely hard for her. She still exudes confidence in all she does and is an amazing child to be around. Ginny is why I decided to pursue my passion for education to the doctoral level. I would also like to dedicate this study to my parents, Scott and Janet Santana, for always believing in me and pushing me to always do my very best. I am eternally grateful for their sacrifices for our family to give us a better life. Dr. Melissa Gilliam has been my rock throughout this complete process. She has never hesitated to provide me with all the needed support and guidance throughout this process. Dr. Gilliam pushed me to be the best researcher and writer I could possibly be by providing me with the tools needed to ensure my success and independence during the process.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of Dr. Gilliam, who has worked tirelessly with me during my dissertation journey. Her grace, patience, and understanding have made this process almost seamless. I would also like to acknowledge the support and help given by Dr. Ross. His input and support have helped ensure my research is scholarly and effective. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the numerous faculty and staff at Walden University who have helped develop my skills as a writer and researcher.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Students diagnosed with ASD are more likely than their nondisabled peers to face social concerns in school settings, including difficulty expressing their feelings and emotions (Lloyd, 2019). If children and teens with ASD are taught appropriate social cues and interactions at an early age, then as adults with ASD, they will experience decreased chances of depression and increased opportunities for independence and positive adjustment to life after school (Lim, 2019; Lloyd, 2019; Shore, 2020).

Children with ASD also struggle with following directions and are likelier to have a shortened attention span (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Children and teenagers with ASD often have difficulty understanding the social behaviors of others, which causes difficulty in making and maintaining friendships with peers (Autism New Jersey, 2019). Students with ASD often have problems working cooperatively with peers due to the perception that their behaviors may be socially inappropriate (CDC, 2020; Ireri et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2020). Behavioral concerns can affect how children with ASD interact with others, leading to adverse effects well into adulthood (Alverson et al., 2019; CDC, 2022; Elias &White, 2018). Bury et al. (2020) described how noted social issues might adversely affect potential successes later in life, such as a lack of employment or higher educational opportunities. Social skills instruction could help mitigate the adverse effects (Frye, 2018; Grob et al., 2019; Lloyd, 2019; Moody & Laugeson, 2020).

For this study, I gathered information from special education and general education teachers who work with students ages 6–21. The information derived from this

study can help add to an increased quality of life for students and adults with ASD. The findings of this study may help school staff and families of students with ASD to understand the skills and training needed to effectively equip students with ASD with the social skills necessary to succeed in the postsecondary school environment.

This chapter includes information on the background of ASD regarding the diagnosis and the historical and educational aspects. The problem statement, the purpose of the study, and research questions are discussed, as is the conceptual framework. The nature of the study is also addressed in this section. I also provide definitions of commonly used terms and discuss the assumptions, scope, and delimitations. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and significance of this study.

Background

ASD is characterized by behaviors that could impact children's social, communication, or behavioral abilities. There is no known cause for the condition, although current research points to a neurological cause (Frye, 2018). ASD is a spectrum disorder due to the variation in type and severity levels of those diagnosed (Autism New Jersey, 2019; CDC, 2020; Sharma et al., 2018). The CDC explained a broad spectrum of needs and abilities for those diagnosed with ASD, ranging from severely disabled to higher functioning. Symptoms of ASD tend to develop within the first two years of life. However, a diagnosis can be made at any time. Frequently, the diagnosis is made when early warning signs first appear (CDC, 2020).

Signs of ASD in children include making little or very inconsistent eye contact and rarely looking at the speaker during a conversation (CDC, 2020). Frye (2018)

reported that children might fail to meet specific developmental milestones, such as walking, standing, and exhibit communication delays. Children with ASD tend to talk to great lengths about a favorite subject without understanding or responding to others who want to talk about something different (CDC, 2020). There are also often restrictive and repetitive behaviors associated with ASD, which may include becoming very upset by slight changes in routine and sensitivity to specific sensory inputs, such as light, noise, temperature, food, or clothing (CDC, 2020; Frye, 2018; Nuske et al., 2019b; Sharma et al., 2018).

Autism New Jersey (2019) described that when teenagers were diagnosed with ASD, it was often in the school setting after being recommended for an evaluation by the special education team. The school gathers staff members from the child study team (CST). A CST consists of a parent or guardian, psychologist, special education teacher, learning disabilities consultant, case manager, general education teacher, social worker, and often a speech/language therapist. The CST observes and reports on classroom data from several content areas and electives, such as art, gym, and music (Autism New Jersey, 2019; Marano & Rota, 2019). Parents can provide additional data from their interactions and privately funded medical team that the CST must consider. The CST is not mandated to follow the recommendations or evaluation findings of the private evaluation (Marano & Rota, 2019). The information gathered by the CST is used to determine if specialized educational services are warranted (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004; Marano & Rota, 2019).

Elias and White (2018) described symptoms of ASD in older children as potentially mirroring those of younger children. Symptoms may also include an inability to understand specific figures of speech, humor, and sarcasm, and often negatively impact relationships with peers, employers, and higher education (Elias & White, 2018; Grob et al., 2019). McKinney et al. (2018) examined how symptoms experienced by adults with ASD included some of the similar experiences felt by children and teens with adults. Though it is rare for adults to be diagnosed with ASD, in all cases with children, teens, and adults diagnosed, ASD encompasses a wide range of abilities and needs, referred to as the autism spectrum (Autism New Jersey, 2019; CDC, 2020; McKinney et al., 2018). Criteria to effectively meet the needs of students with ASD should ideally be addressed beginning in preschool; however, transitional planning is mandated within the individualized education plan (IEP) once the student reaches 14 years old (IDEA, 2004; IRIS Center, 2021).

Transitional planning should include all IEP team members (Elias & White, 2018; IDEA, 2004). Per IDEA, the team should discuss postsecondary school goals, transition services, and activities during transition planning. The process is results-oriented and facilitates students' movement from school to their postsecondary school endeavors. The plan should be based on the individual child's needs and include planning for adult living (IDEA, 2004; IRIS Center, 2021). Transitional planning is a process that provides for various assessments tailored to the student's individualized goals once the students leave the school setting. Once the evaluations are completed, an IEP is created with measurable and attainable goals for the student (IRIS Center, 2021).

Transition assessments cover several categories, including education/training, employment, and independent living (IRIS Center, 2021). Each assessment determines the appropriate instruction, accommodations, modifications, and skills needed for students to obtain and meet individualized postsecondary school goals (IRIS Center, 2021; U.S. Department of Education [U.S. DOE], 2020). The U.S. DOE Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS, 2020) mandates the use of both formal and informal assessments should be considered. Formal assessments may include surveys and standardized exams, whereas informal assessments can be used to gather data from other resources, such as classroom observations, interviews, medical records, and work samples (IRIS Center, 2021). Assessments also help identify the course of study the students will follow while still in school (U.S. DOE OSERS, 2020).

While enrolled in public school, students with disabilities can be enrolled in various study tracks, including a regular high school diploma, an alternate high school diploma, a dual or concurrent enrollment program, and an early college high school (U.S. DOE OSERS, 2020). The Transition Guide, issued by the U.S. DOE in 2017, discussed a requirement to include a summarize the performance (SOP) statement once a child completes high school with a diploma or exceeds the age of protection under the IDEA of 2004. SOP statements should identify the student's current academic achievement level and functional performance and include recommendations on how to best assist the student in meeting their postsecondary goals in higher education or employment (U.S. DOE OSERS, 2020).

Due to the nature of ASD as a lifelong disability, it is imperative that specialized training targeting social skills begins as early as the elementary school years (CDC, 2020; Marano & Rota, 2019). Increased social skills training also requires earlier transitional planning for students with ASD. A lack of transitional social skills is often attributed to a reduced quality of life for adults with ASD (Elias and White, 2018). Incorporating social skills into everyday instruction is essential for preparing students with ASD for life after secondary school (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Autism New Jersey, 2019; Eilenberg et al., 2019). The noted gap in practice is addressed and identified within this study.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is that K-12 special and general education teachers in New Jersey are challenged to implement instructional strategies to support the social development of students with moderate to severe ASD. Training for teachers who work with students with ASD emphasizes academic goals. Seldom does the training center incorporate social skills goals (Greuter et al., 2019; Grob et al., 2019; Pallathra et al., 2018).

Many teachers working with students with disabilities began teaching with limited practicum experience (Brownell et al., 2020). A lack of practicum experience is notable in New Jersey, as the teaching certification only mandates one practicum experience to obtain a general education teaching certification and two practicum experiences to earn a special education teaching certification (New Jersey Department of Education [NJDOE], 2019). One setting must be the general education environment for the special education practicums, and the other can be any special education setting. Hong et al. (2020)

reported numerous special education settings, including self-contained classes, separate school settings, inclusion classes, resource classes, and small group pull-out settings. Having only one practicum limited the ability of preservice teachers to obtain experience in various special education settings (Brownell et al., 2020). Therefore, a lack of practicum experience in multiple settings hindered teachers' ability to teach students with ASD the social skills the students need in different academic settings (Brownell et al., 2020; Cancio et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2020; NJDOE, 2019).

Teaching social skills tools and techniques to students with ASD enables students to implement strategies learned in the school setting in their post-school environment (Adalarasu et al., 2020). When social skills are not taught, it can increase the likelihood of adverse post-school outcomes, such as a lower employment rate, high college attrition rate, and an increase in anxiety due to the rise in mounting social pressures (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Hedley et al., 2019; Oxley & Bernard, 2019). New Jersey is behind the national average regarding the inclusion of students with ASD within the general education setting, which hinders the ability to teach students with ASD to generalize skills learned in school to other settings (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Hedley et al., 2019). According to the latest educational census data, of the 223,903 students enrolled in special education in New Jersey, 45.2% spent 80% or more of their day enrolled in the general education setting compared to the 61.4% seen nationally (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019; NJDOE, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of K-12 special and general education teachers in several districts in New Jersey as it relates to their experience with challenges in implementing instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. Qualitative researchers seek to understand the perspectives of individuals to understand a subjective truth about a known phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2019). Due to the nature of this study, depending on the lived experiences of the teachers taking part in the study, a basic qualitative study is most appropriate. The methodology is aligned with the constructivist or relativist viewpoint, which understands that knowledge is a social construct allowing facts to be given meaning through exchanging information (Burkholder et al., 2019).

Research Question

The following research question guided this basic qualitative study: How do K-12 special and general education teachers in New Jersey perceive their ability to implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this qualitative study is the universal design for transition (UDT). The UDT adapts the universal design for learning (UDL) template commonly used in special education (Scheirer, 2020). UDL also complies with universal design principles for instruction under IDEA (IDEA, 2004; Scheirer, 2020). UDT focuses on various practices in the classroom to help prepare students to generalize and apply their skills to different settings (Scheirer, 2020). Under UDT models, transitional

planning blends components of UDL and other best practices approaches, such as effective inclusion measures, to help create the UDT framework. UDT makes barrier-free transitions for students with disabilities in multiple life domains (Scott & Bruno, 2018; Scheirer, 2020).

When looking at U.S. educational law, such as IDEA and ADA, the blending of UDL into the framework of UDT helps meet requirements set forth by the IDEA. The UDL design also meets the transitional planning requirements for all students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004; Thoma et al., 2019). The framework helps ensure that instruction is geared to a more inclusive environment and helps prepare students with disabilities with the tools needed to successfully handle the inevitable transitions that students with disabilities will encounter in life (Thoma et al., 2019). In addition, the UDT framework seeks to understand the need for training in social skills development and generalization for both school staff and children with disabilities (Scheirer, 2020; Thoma et al., 2019).

The UDT framework highlights merging the noted transitional skills required for students and UDL tenets to produce the UDT outcome (Thoma et al., 2019). The UDL and transitional goals incorporate multiple means of varying life and academic domains to create a framework that allows for the development of self-determination, various means of assessment, multiple life domains, and multiple resources and perspectives (Scott & Bruno, 2018). When applied with fidelity, the UDT framework grounds this study in a manner that meets the needs of all learners (Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018; Thoma et al., 2019).

The research question in this study was written to understand teachers' perceived ability and barriers to prepare students with ASD with the social skills needed to succeed in their post-schooling years. The UDT framework was constructed to meet this need by blending several best practice techniques to create academic and social outcomes that meet the needs of students in various life domains, such as employment, secondary school, vocational training, and independent living (Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018; Thoma et al., 2019). The UDT framework aligns with the purpose of the study and sets a foundation for the problem explored and the intended outcomes of the survey.

Nature of the Study

This was a qualitative study using interview questions, with the implementation of a basic qualitative design. Qualitative research arose as an alternative to the positivist paradigm to understand how people view and experience the world around them (Burkholder et al., 2019). The qualitative design was appropriate as this study examined the perceptions of teachers working with students with ASD and teacher perceived efficacy to successfully teach students the social skills needed to experience life in the postsecondary school setting.

For this study, I conducted and recorded interviews with each participant. Transcripts were then analyzed via open coding to create themes and trends that seek to answer the research question and obtain meaningful data during a qualitative interview. I used open and axial coding to analyze the data and conduct a thematic analysis. Coding assigns meaning to a word or phrase, allowing the researcher to develop themes or trends within the responses (Saldana, 2021).

Definitions

Definitions of common terms used throughout this study are detailed below:

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): A disorder that affects one's ability to focus and pay attention to specific tasks. There are also known incidences of impulsive behavior and hyperactivity. Although prescription medication may manage symptoms, there is no known cause or cure (CDC, 2022).

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): ASD is a developmental and neurological disability that can affect the ability to communicate and socialize with peers effectively (CDC, 2020). ASD is also known to cause academic and behavioral concerns in those diagnosed. Despite there being no known cause or cure, symptoms can be managed by therapeutic means and prescription medication (CDC, 2020).

Efficacy: Efficacy relates to the ability of a product or service to carry out its intended task. For example, in education, the effectiveness of specific professional development (PD) entails teachers' ability to successfully utilize the tools taught to them (Love, 2019)

Free and appropriate education (FAPE): FAPE is a mandate listed under the IDEA that provides special education services to meet the needs of students with disabilities at no cost to families. The services can also include related services such as speech and occupational therapy. FAPE also allows for the implementation of individualized accommodations and modifications within the school setting to meet the needs of each student (IDEA, 2004).

Inclusion: Inclusion is the education of students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers. Inclusion generally occurs inside the regular education classroom, with the services being provided to the student via push-in instead of pull-out resource services. Inclusion offers services and accommodations to students in the mainstream setting (Test et al., 2020).

Individualized education plan (IEP): An IEP is offered to students who require a specialized education plan under the parameters set forth by the IDEA. The central tenets of an IEP include individualized instructions, modifications, and accommodations as needed by each student. An IEP also consists of the individualized consideration of a student's placement in their least restrictive environment (LRE; IDEA, 2004).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): A student's LRE is considered placement within the school setting that allows students with disabilities to be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. The LRE determination is done individually for all students with an IEP (IDEA, 2004).

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS): MTSS is a systematic framework used to inform data-based decision-making within a school setting. MTSS is a team-driven approach to meet the needs of all students. Within MTSS is a continued layering of supports offered to all students to introduce interventions as soon as the needs arise. The first layer is where all students begin, and this looks like whole group instruction using research-based best practice methods. Students who do not respond to explicit instruction within the first tier are moved to the second tier. Tier 2 supports offer small group instruction and targeted interventions. If the student does not respond to Tier 2 supports,

then the student is placed in Tier 3, which comes with more individualized support and a referral to the CST for evaluation (NJDOE, 2020).

Preservice teachers: A preservice teacher is a teacher who is currently undergoing a teacher preparation course at an accredited college or university. Preservice teachers are currently not working in a school setting unless a practicum or student teaching experience is required to fulfill degree requirements (Hong et al., 2020).

Professional development (PD): PD in education is the training of school staff on techniques and tools to utilize within the classroom. PD often varies in length and topics and occurs throughout the day (Lofthouse, 2019).

School climate/culture: The school climate or culture includes the perceptions of teachers and school staff about their ability to effectively interact with and collaborate with all stakeholders within the school setting. A climate perception also consists of the perceptions of school staff to seek help and receive and give feedback to other school staff in a manner that allows them to feel comfortable doing so (Capp, 2020).

Social skills: Social skills are the skills needed to effectively communicate with others daily. These skills help build peer relationships and include verbal and non-verbal cues (Elias & White, 2018; Pallathra et al., 2018). For social skills to be effectively taught to students with ASD, students must generalize the skills taught to various locations and settings throughout their lives (Fayette & Bond, 2018).

Transition plan: A transition plan for students with special education includes a coordinated set of services and activities for a child that helps to improve their academic and functional achievement in various settings. Transitional services are based on each

child's needs and consider strengths, preferences, and interests. Transitional planning should occur during placement changes within the special education environment for students with disabilities. In addition, transitional statements are required within the IEP once the child reaches 14 (IDEA, 2004).

Assumptions

Assumptions in a qualitative study are statements that the researcher believes to be accurate and truthful (Burkholder et al., 2019). The first assumption for this study was that all participants would be honest and genuine during the interview process. One threat to the validity of qualitative work is the trustworthiness or potential deception of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I assumed that all participants would be honest about their responses and not disclose the contents of the study until the study's completion.

The second assumption was that the participant pool would include at least 10–12 participants representing elementary, middle, and high school special and general teachers with at least 2 years of experience teaching students with ASD in New Jersey. A sample size of 10–12 participants is appropriate in a qualitative study when the participant pool stems from a homogeneous group of persons with similar areas of expertise needed for a study (Burkholder et al., 2019). Because the participants in this study were all special education and general education teachers with at least 2 years of experience working with students with ASD, 10–12 participants would meet the requirements for saturation (Burkholder et al., 2019).

Scope and Delimitations

Ravitch and Carl (2021) discussed the importance of using information and expertise within the local setting during a research study. With the problem and purpose of this study, I sought to understand a teacher's struggle to implement the instructional strategies needed to equip students with ASD with the social skills necessary to be successful after high school. The scope of this study only included teachers within the state studied and entailed certain delimitations.

Delimitations are limitations set within a study by the researcher to ensure the feasibility of the research and the researcher's ability to achieve the intended goal of the study. Delimitations generally concern themselves with the theoretical background, the research questions, and the population sample (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Because the parameters of this study included only special and general education teachers who have taught students with ASD in the K-12 setting for at least 2 years, the participant pool was further limited. Subsequently, educational supports and resources vary from each locale. Some groups of teachers may be underrepresented by the sample population targeted.

The UDT framework was deemed most appropriate for this target group, although the weak central coherence theory of ASD was considered but ultimately rejected. The UDT framework eventually showed the most promise to ensure the transferability of the findings of this study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) described transferability within a qualitative study as when a study can be applied to broader settings while maintaining its context. Transferability can be increased by implementing a detailed description of the

data collected and tools used to compare and transfer aspects of the study by stakeholders (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Limitations

Limitations within a study are weaknesses in the design or methods used during the study (Burkholder et al., 2019). The limitations noted within this study may be related to potential dependability, bias, and the ongoing global pandemic. The results of this study are contingent on truthful and accurate responses from the participants that are free from any potential bias (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used an approved data collection method and open coding technique for this study. The techniques were adapted from best-practice methods identified in prior research and approved by Walden University. Using this technique helped to mitigate any potential bias concerns.

Bias in qualitative research is a common threat to the dependability of the research and findings. Researchers must be aware of potential bias and allow the participants' interview answers to guide the research conclusions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, I only included participants from locations where I am not employed and with whom I have neither personal nor professional relationships to avoid potential bias and conflict of interest.

This study took place during a global pandemic; therefore, all the interviews were conducted virtually. The final limitation includes the reliability of the information provided by participants. Therefore, this study relied on the truthful responses and experiences of teachers.

Significance

This study is significant as little information is known regarding the practicality and efficacy of social skills instruction taught to students with ASD during their education years (Fayette & Bond, 2018). The results of this study will help identify the gaps in practice teachers face when implementing transitional social skills techniques within their classrooms. The social development of students with ASD is vital to ensure that students with ASD can generalize the social skills taught to them in earlier years to various settings in the postsecondary school world (Moody & Laugeson, 2020). Walden University calls for researchers to help effect positive social change within their environments. This study can help accomplish positive social change through the research gathered. Practicing and developing practical social skills is necessary to successfully transition students with ASD into adulthood. The earlier social skills are developed, and transitional planning starts, the more likely students and adults with ASD experience positive post-school outcomes (Ireri et al., 2019). There is a noted lack of research on this topic and a gap in practice in the school setting (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Frye, 2018; Vincent & Ralston, 2020). With this study, I sought to bridge that gap.

Summary

In this qualitative study, I examined how K-12 special and general education teachers in several districts in New Jersey struggle to implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. If students with ASD are taught the appropriate skills needed to be successful later in life, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes as adults (Moody & Laugeson, 2020). Social skills training

can help mitigate many barriers and should occur in various locations to help students generalize their skills from one place to another. Training will also help ease other transitional periods within students' lives (Grob et al., 2019; Lloyd, 2019).

Although federal law, such as IDEA, mandates the placement of a transitional statement within an IEP at the age of 14, the best practice approach states that transitional planning should be included within the IEP earlier than the law enforces (Moody & Laugeson, 2020). One approach often used in an inclusive setting is the UDL approach to learning, which meets the child's needs in their current setting. The UDL method is then merged into the UDT framework, which looks to assist students with disabilities throughout transitional periods in the school setting (Schrier, 2020). Given current training and resources available to teachers from school administrators, school staff report that they do not feel equipped with the necessary training and resources to provide those skills to students with ASD (Fowler et al., 2019; Frye, 2018; Fu et al., 2021; Hutzler et al., 2019).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this study, I explored the problem of how K-12 special and general teachers in New Jersey are challenged to implement instructional strategies to support the social development of students with moderate to severe ASD. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how K-12 special and general teachers in several districts in New Jersey struggle to implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. Unfortunately, training courses inadequately prepare current teachers with the skills and resources needed to familiarize students with ASD with the social skills and strategies needed to succeed after their school years (Cancio et al., 2018; Khalil et al., 2020; Lawson, 2020). I examined special education and general education teachers' existing perceptions concerning challenges that affect their ability to teach students with ASD the transitional social skills needed once they leave the school-aged environment. The literature reviewed during this study helped provide the rationale, a historical background, and an understanding of why this research was needed.

Persons with ASD have frequently reported a lack of social motivation and increased social anxiety due to the social limitations associated with ASD (Pallathra et al., 2018). Routinely, these symptoms have caused specific barriers to a successful transition from secondary school for teens and young adults with ASD, such as an inability to collaborate with peers or communicate with professors and employers (Eilenberg et al., 2019; First et al., 2019; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Barriers have been exasperated by a lack of established communication and coordination of the educational

stakeholders charged with ensuring success in education for students with ASD (Havlicek & Bilaver, 2021).

Some children and adults diagnosed with ASD suffer from what is known as low-functioning ASD or cases where the severity level is much higher (CDC, 2020). In these cases, children and adults with severe ASD often required around-the-clock lifelong care. Adults with severe ASD may also need assisted living facilities, and children with severe ASD may require in-home nursing services (CDC 2020; McKinney et al., 2018). In other cases where the severity level is lower, or the child/adult is considered higher functioning, students with ASD may live independently or with minimal assistance (McKinney et al., 2018). Typically, most cases involve children and adults between the higher and lower severity levels, classified as moderate level ASD (CDC, 2020).

Medication can help control symptoms, such as irritability, aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, and depression, often associated with ASD in children and adults (Autism New Jersey, 2019; CDC, 2020; McKinney et al., 2018). Behavioral and psychological therapy may also help teach life skills and necessary independent living skills to children and adults with ASD to help reduce challenging behaviors and build upon strengths. Therapies could also help children and adults learn social communication skills and language skills needed to be successful within the education setting and in life after school (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Buli-Holmberg et al., 2019; Elias & White, 2018; Grueter et al., 2019; Moody & Laugeson, 2020).

When students with ASD are not taught the appropriate social skills within the classroom and school setting, they can suffer lifelong consequences during their

transition from secondary school (Pellicano et al., 2018). Adults with ASD have often faced higher unemployment rates than nondisabled peers (Frank et al., 2018). Unemployment has often been attributed to a lack of social skills needed to function after leaving school (Hedley et al., 2019). Furthermore, adults with ASD have also indicated increased social anxiety in college/university settings, which was also attributed to a lack of developing the needed social skills (Lallukka et al., 2020). A lack of social skills training has often not been appropriately mitigated in the school setting, resulting in increased negative behaviors and anxiety in teens and young adults with ASD and an education that does not meet the needs of all learners (Alverson et al., 2019).

An increase in the diagnosis of children with ASD could be credited to developing more effective diagnostic tools and points to a demand for earlier intervention services to meet the needs of the students at an earlier age (First et al., 2019). Testing for ASD includes the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scale (ADOS), and often, the diagnosis of ASD is made by a pediatrician due to concerns either brought about by the parent or doctors during routine well-child visits (Autism New Jersey, 2019; CDC, 2020). Licensed physicians, clinical or school psychologists, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists conduct testing in one to two sessions, totaling around 1 hour in combined length; the number of sessions will depend on the child in question and if the child can complete the testing in one session (Kamp-Becker et al., 2018). ADOS, along with the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*), provides standardized criteria to help diagnose ASD in each case (CDC, 2020; Kamp-Becker et al., 2018). Due to the increasing number of students identified with

ASD, more research on services is needed to help the students, their families, and the educational staff meets the needs of students with ASD (Cardinal et al., 2021; McCloskey, 2018).

The literature review in this chapter includes studies that discuss the conceptual framework used to understand this research and the study's historical context. I also review the relevant symptoms of ASD regarding the transitional experiences of students with ASD. Additionally, I describe the historical data surrounding ASD in education to explain this study's purpose. This chapter also includes the perceptions of current transitional experiences of those students with ASD and other stakeholders. The sections contain studies reviewing the practice of inclusion in schools related to transitional and social skills, practical teaching practices, and how current staff PD, related to ASD, affects the perceived self-efficacy of school staff to teach said skills to students with ASD. In the final sections, I discuss the effect of transitional experiences on the unemployment rate of adults with ASD and other postsecondary schools' experiences and concerns within the local setting. For this study, I reviewed studies that included various methodologies.

Literature Search Strategy

Several databases were used to conduct this literature review, including EBSCO, the Education Information Resource Center, SAGE Publishing, and Google Scholar. Articles were then accessed using the Walden University Library. Additionally, the websites of the CDC, American Pediatricians Association, and National Center for

Learning Disabilities were used to access standard definitions for this study and to understand the transitional needs of what should be included in a student's IEP.

The key terms used to access literature for this review included *special education and autism, autism, autism, and educational transitions, effective autism PD, teacher efficacy and transitional teaching skills, teaching training and teaching social skills to students with autism, effective practices in teaching social skills to students with autism, the transitional experiences of students with autism,* and *the transitional experiences of stakeholders of students with autism.* Due to the abundance of literature concerning transitional experiences of students with ASD and teachers who work with ASD, parameters were set to include only peer-reviewed articles published after 2017. However, earlier reports were included if the research added to this study's historical context. This process allowed me to confirm a gap in the special education research literature.

Conceptual Framework

UDL

The IDEA of 2004 is based upon the principles of a universal design in education. UDL helps meet IDEA requirements by providing an educational experience that offers multiple means of representation, action, and engagement (IDEA, 2004; Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018). Universal design ideas began in the 1950s by removing physical barriers for disabled individuals. The removal of the barriers started with *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this case, racial segregation of students at schools was declared unconstitutional. Advocates used this legal precedent to promote the inclusion of students

with disabilities. The notion of inclusion transitioned into education and called for the idea that all learners should have access to all content, allowing accommodations as needs arise (Scheirer, 2020). As a result, UDL was identified as a best practice approach to meeting the needs of all learners, as it met the legal requirements of an LRE and a FAPE under IDEA (Scheirer, 2020).

In 1997, IDEA mandated equal access to the general education curriculum for all students (IDEA, 1997). In 2001, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act further raised expectations for all students to be on grade level in reading and math courses (NCLB, 2001). With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, additional requirements were enacted to improve the functional and transitional goals for students with disabilities. Updated changes simultaneously included access to academic standards and transitional planning (IDEA, 2004). When applying the same principles to transitions within special education, UDL methodologies were blended with transitional requirements for students with special needs to help create a framework that links academics and transitional planning (Scott & Bruno, 2018). Applying UDL principles to secondary transitions created a framework known as UDT to help promote barrier-free transitions for students with exceptionalities (Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018).

UDT

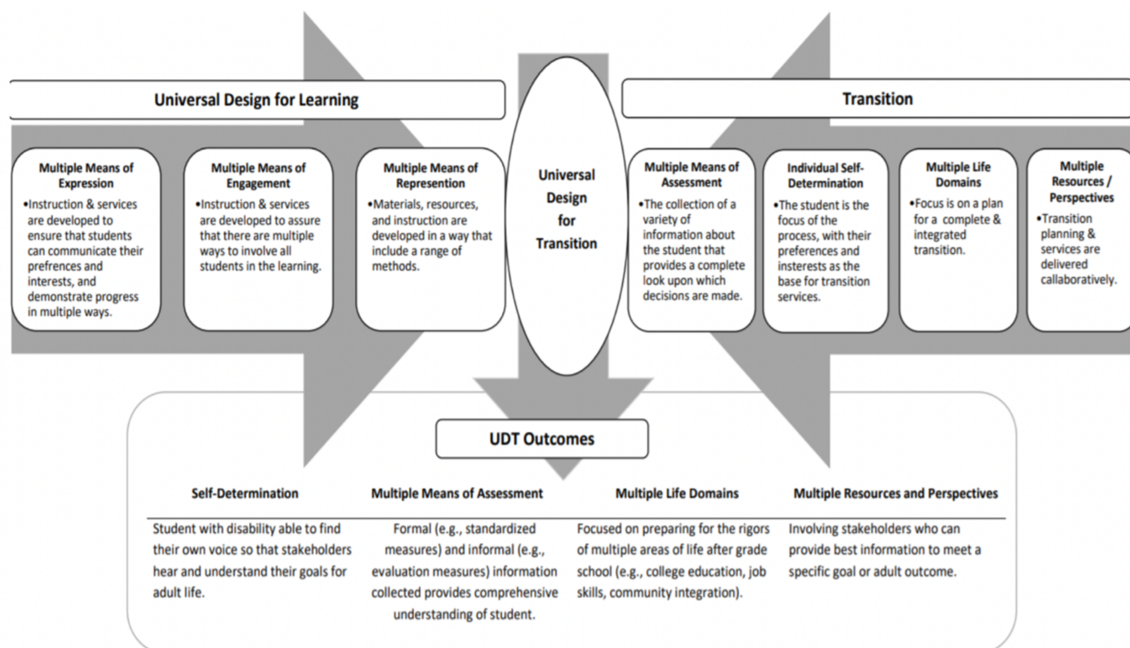
UDT helps provide students with disabilities of all ages access to the general education curriculum and meets the transitional needs of said students concurrently (Scott & Bruno, 2018). Additionally, UDT is a much-needed framework to provide teachers with a model to help blend students’ transitional goals and UDL tenets to create an

educational experience that helps prepare students with disabilities for life after postsecondary school (Scheirer, 2020). Universal design ideologies call for equitable use of academic content/materials, flexibility, easy-to-understand material and design, effective communication, low physical effort, and accommodations for all learners (Scott & Bruno, 2018).

As presented in Figure 1, the ideologies and ideas of transitional planning merged into one framework, UDT, that seeks to prepare students with ASD for their postsecondary school endeavors (Scheirer, 2020). The link between academics and transition planning helps name the transitional standards for instruction and places a timeline for goal completion (Scott, 2018). Evidence-based practices are chosen to help monitor and evaluate transitional standards to assist postsecondary schools (Scott & Bruno, 2018).

Figure 1

Universal Design for Transition Conceptual Framework



UDT supports post-school outcomes in various domains, including education, community participation, employment, and independent living (Scott & Bruno, 2018). UDL calls for multiple means of expression, engagement, and representation (Scheirer, 2020). Transitional planning calls for various means of assessment, individual self-determination, life domains, and multiple resources or perspectives (Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018). When blended, the tenets form the UDT (Scott & Bruno, 2018). UDT outcomes help ensure self-determination, multiple means of assessment, various life domains, and numerous resources/perspectives (Scheirer, 2020).

Self-determination considers a student's preference and allows the student choices within their educational journey. Self-determination enables all students' strengths, weaknesses, and perspectives to be reflected (Burke et al., 2020). There are significant

beneficial transitional outcomes for students with ASD when self-determination skills are taught, especially regarding employment (Scott & Bruno, 2018). Self-determination skills are essential for students across grade levels, disability labels, and settings and can be monitored and tracked via multiple means of assessments (Burke et al., 2020).

Multiple means of assessments for students with exceptionalities occur when students are assessed to identify the skills needed for a successful transition on a personalized level. Assessments should match students' needs, desires, and interests (Scott & Bruno, 2018). Multiple means of assessment align with the principles of UDL that also express a need for numerous means of representation (Schreier, 2020). Representation can be formal or informal assessments, observations, state exams, and other evaluation means that ensure a successful transition in various life domains (Scott & Bruno, 2018).

Life domains include vocational training, educational options (e.g., college, university, and technical trade schools), independent living, community support, and employment (Scott & Bruno, 2020). The UDT framework ensures that students are aware of all available options. In addition, students are taught the self-determination skills needed to ensure that students are included in their transitional planning. Self-determination skills are developed through the collaboration of stakeholders from various aspects of a student's life. Stakeholders can include mentors, community leaders, school staff, and other stakeholders involved in the student's education to blend academic and transitional planning (Schreier, 2020).

UDT helps provide a pathway and model for teachers to intertwine academic and transitional planning within a school setting and meet the central tenets of IDEA (Schrier, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2020). UDT can also effectively train teachers to help blend academic and transitional planning areas in a meaningful and consistent manner. A detailed analysis of what this training entails is discussed in this chapter. Studies have shown that UDT is an effective means to bridge the gap between academic standards and transitional planning (Schreier, 2020). UDT is also shown to improve student engagement and increase academic achievement for students on various educational levels (Schreier, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2020). The framework helps understand this study's rationale, purpose, and need.

The purpose of the study was to understand how K-12 special education and general education teachers implement transitional social skills in their schools to teach students with ASD. The research question was written in a manner to answer the purpose. The UDT framework is based on removing barriers within the school setting that inhibit the transition process for students with ASD (Schreier, 2020). UDT represents a framework upon which effective teaching practices can be based. UDT concepts allow students to practice and hone transitional skills that can later be generalized to other settings, benefiting the student long after schooling (Schreier, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2020). Therefore, the conceptual framework used is appropriate for this study.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

History of ASD in Education

In the United States, between 1910 and 1930, the number of students identified with special needs increased in the public school system (Kauffman et al., 2018). McCray et al. (2021) discussed how increased identification included creating segregated schools for students with disabilities. According to McCray et al., *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 provided a drive for true inclusion and equality for students regarding racial segregation. *Brown v. Board of Education* analyzed the massive racial inequalities within the school system and identified that separating students by race was inherently unequal (McCray et al., 2021). Therefore, segregation based on race within the school system was declared unconstitutional, and students with disabilities rose to the forefront of the educational system (Warren & Supreme Court of The United States, 1953). Thus, parents of students with disabilities began to use this same concept of equality for their children with disabilities (McCray et al., 2021).

Naraian (2021) and Pellicano et al. (2018) discussed the emphasis on inclusion within the school environment being now experienced internationally, as seen at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, under Article 24. Article 24 pointed to the view that all students with disabilities should have access to a free education within their community and be afforded the needed support and resources to make this possible (Pellicano et al., 2018). The convention was further cemented by the Salamanca Statement, which stated that all students should be enrolled in regular schools unless there were compelling reasons otherwise. In addition, the Salamanca

Statement encouraged the use of inclusionary educational practices (van Kessel et al., 2020; Pellicano et al., 2018). Consequently, U.S. legislation began to focus on students with disabilities to remain on par with international legislation (McCray et al., 2021).

The early 1970s brought about an increase in the normalization of the inclusion of students with disabilities into the mainstream environment with the passing of several pieces of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Education for Handicapped Children Act, Section 504, and IDEA (ADA, 1990; IDEA, 2004; McCray et al., 2021). Sarrett (2018) and McCray et al. highlighted how the EAHC, passed in 1975, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 helped set the pathway commonly used educational terms today, such as LRE and inclusive education. LRE determination can vary from homebound instruction, a separate school setting, a self-contained environment within a regular school setting, resource or "pull out" support, or an inclusion setting where services are offered to students inside the general education classroom (Brock, 2018). In 1990, the ADA added further protections for students with disabilities, as did the 2008 Higher Education Act (Sarrett, 2018). Yell and Bateman (2020) confirmed similar notions and further expanded on the idea that the EAHC act allowed for the complex nature of an LRE determination to begin on an individualized basis. When IDEA was passed in 1990 and further updated in 2004, the LRE determination was broadened to ensure that all students with disabilities were exposed to the general education curriculum. IDEA also mandated that students with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible (IDEA, 2004; Yell & Bateman, 2020).

The passing of IDEA in 1990 also increased the number of students reported as having ASD. In 1992-1993, 1 in 150 students were diagnosed with ASD. The rate increased in 2004 to 1 in 125 and 1 in 68 in 2010. As of 2016, 1 in 54 students was diagnosed with ASD in the US (CDC, 2020). It was not until the 1990 amendments of the EAHC act were transformed into IDEA that ASD was included in the lists of recognized educational disabilities (IDEA, 2004; De Bruin, 2019). The mandate of FAPE, as presented in IDEA, assured that all students had access to appropriate instruction in their individualized LRE. As needed, the LRE and FAPE mandates included related services, such as speech and occupational therapy, at no expense to parents and families (IDEA, 2004). With this increase in diagnoses came a rise in FAPE litigation (Kauffman et al., 2021).

Kauffman et al. (2021) discussed how the increase in the FAPE litigation was disproportionately affecting students with ASD when compared to other diagnoses that qualify for IEP-related services. The disproportionate findings were evident when looking at FAPE cases seen at a court level. One such FAPE case, Endrew F. v Douglas County School District, 2017, dealt with a family of a student with ASD who believed their child was not meeting their needs in their current academic setting (Endrew F. v. Douglas County, 2017). Yell and Bateman (2019) detailed how in a Supreme Court case, the parents enrolled their child in a private school and sought reimbursement from the school district. The Court ruled that to ensure FAPE; school districts must have a program in place that meets the academic needs of each student in a manner that allows students to show significant progress. During the case, the school district argued that

IDEA called for IEPs to provide for some improvement. However, the Court disagreed and ruled that school districts must provide a program that does “markedly more demanding than the ‘merely more than *de minimis*’ test.” Therefore, the Court ruled in favor of the parent (Endrew F. v. Douglas County, 2017).

Although highly effective and valuable for students with disabilities, IDEA protections cease once the student reached 21 years old (IDEA, 2004). Osborne et al. (2021) and McLeod et al. (2019) considered how the rates of students with ASD attending a postsecondary institution were climbing and concluded that students needed to understand how to transfer protections from IDEA to postsecondary school settings under ADA or Section 504. It is well-known that when students with ASD undergo effective transitional planning during their school years, the likelihood of a successful transition into adulthood is also impacted (Gilmore et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2020; Snell-Rood et al., 2020). Elias and White (2018) detailed that a successful transition could be defined as graduation from college(s), full-time employment, and increased independence and self-regulation skills needed for adulthood.

Rashedi et al. (2021) concluded that when teens with ASD emerged into adulthood, they often sought to form their identities and desired increased independent living opportunities and responsibilities. However, Lei et al. (2020) described how adults with ASD often reported increased social, emotional, and organizational demands in the postsecondary school atmosphere, and frequently students with ASD felt unprepared. Hotez et al. (2018) added to the conclusions of Lei et al. when they concluded that student unpreparedness emphasized the need for self-advocacy skills and the

understanding of how laws such as the ADA and Section 504 could help meet the needs of adults with ASD once students left the school setting. Ceja and Kranzow (2020) noted students with ASD to receive support; students must first understand what supports are needed and what challenges are faced. Cox et al. (2021) concluded that "students can best overcome these challenges by recognizing how autism affects them and advocating for themselves to receive appropriate support" (p.253). Advocacy goals could be achieved through effective inclusionary practices that allowed social skills development within the general education setting (Zuber & Webber, 2019).

Inclusion of Students ASD Within General Education

Inclusion goals were clearly defined by federal laws such as IDEA and the ADA as having all children with IEPs educated in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible (Harrison et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2018). However, as Harrison et al. identified, the specifics of implementing successful inclusionary practices were not well-known. When implemented ineffectively, placement in the mainstream environment frequently resulted in students with ASD feeling overwhelmed in a larger setting, with more distractions. It was often noisy and chaotic, especially during transitions (Pellicano et al., 2018). McKenna et al. (2019) discussed that inclusion pointed to increased access in the general education curriculum and is often shown to improve adaptive behaviors, peer relations, and more positive transitional outcomes. McKenna et al. contradicted the findings of Pellicano et al., who highlighted the notion that, at times, educating students with ASD in the general education environment with nondisabled peers had also been noted to lower academic achievement for students with

disabilities, such as ASD. Bailey and Baker (2020) detailed how the placement may also have affected their emotional health if they were not provided with adequate resources and tools in their current placement (Bailey & Baker, 2020; Pellicano et al., 2018).

Goodall (2019) determined that inclusion was widely debated in the educational community. The researcher pointed out that many studies argued that not all students could succeed in the general education setting due to concerns associated with negative peer interactions, the teachers' qualifications in the classroom, and the varying levels of support needed for students with ASD. The same concepts were reinforced by Pellicano et al. (2018), who showed how it had been observed that when students with ASD were placed into a mainstream environment without needed support, they were more likely to experience higher expulsion rates.

Pellicano et al. (2018) described the idea of what is known as the "inclusion illusion," which questioned the belief that although students with ASD may be placed into the general education setting which met the legal mandate of laws such as IDEA, the students were not genuinely having their educational needs met. The illusion alluded to the idea that students with ASD may suffer academically and socially due to classroom environments that were often physically large, noisy, and included chaotic transitions between subject matters and classes. Both Pellicano et al. and Wood (2021) supported the belief that inclusion was a fundamental right for all students. However, as reported by Elias and White (2019) and Harrison et al. (2019), given the reported deficiencies in teacher training and readiness, classroom set-ups, and transitional aspects of a school day, the current inclusion setting may be more harmful than beneficial for students with ASD.

Recent researchers also highlighted that students with ASD were more likely to face bullying and have negative peer interactions (Elias & White, 2018; Harrison et al., 2019; Goodall, 2018).

Negative peer interactions could increase the likelihood of violent episodes (Lai et al., 2020). Negative peer interactions and violent episodes in the mainstream environment were more likely to be witnessed during transitional periods of the day, such as switching from recess to class, or during other unstructured times, such as lunch and dismissal (Harrison et al., 2019). Therefore, the inclusive setting may be more harmful to some students than beneficial without the proper training and support (Harrison et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2018).

Increased adverse aspects of an inclusion setting were detailed by Pellicano et al. (2018), who further described how the inclusion environment could cause increased distractions for both general and special education students due to the increased presence of challenging behaviors. However, McKenna et al. (2019) argued that behaviors and challenges could be mitigated via implementing evidence-based practices within the classroom setting. Evidence-based practices should focus on building the social skills of students with ASD to increase their social cognition ability (McKenna et al., 2019). Carrington et al. (2021) specified that "for students on the autism spectrum, there continues to be a wide gap between research-based findings and school-based interventions" (p. 7). An opposing view by Harrison et al. (2019) argued that increased academic achievement had been noted when students were in a smaller classroom setting increased academic achievement when students were in a smaller classroom instead of a

larger inclusive setting. Smaller classrooms, ideally less than 15 students, may not always mean inclusion in the general education environment, especially when staff had not received the appropriate training (Kurth et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2018).

Although inclusive settings may follow the federal requirements outlined in IDEA, the settings do not always provide high-quality instruction as mandated by IDEA, as researched by Pellicano et al. (2018). D'Agostino and Douglas (2020) detailed how teachers often reported a lack of training to help ease transitions within a school day for students with ASD and incorporate social skills goals within the general education setting. McKenna et al. (2019) reported that "teachers assigned to general education settings must be able to adapt, design, and deliver instruction that is beneficial to students with disabilities in inclusive settings" (p. 590). D'Agostino and Douglas emphasized that many teachers felt that they did not have the proper training to accomplish effective inclusionary practices when working with students with ASD. Teachers in this study attributed their feelings to the wide range of needs when working with said students in an inclusion setting (Rodden et al., 2018).

Inclusion within education was a best practice described by the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education and noted in federal laws, such as IDEA, ADA, and EAHC (Harrison et al., 2019). However, best practice techniques were not always shared with teachers and school staff (Pellicano et al., 2018). It is essential to highlight the notion that a student's LRE does not always mean inclusion, as presented in the case of the Board of Ed. V. Rowley in 1982. The Rowley case ruled that a student's LRE determination should be done individually, which may mean that inclusion for one child

is not their true LRE (Harrison et al., 2019). When an LRE determination incorrectly placed a child in an inclusion environment, especially those who suffered from disorders such as ASD, then that child was more likely to experience poor and an increased likelihood of a negative school experience, as evident by Harrison et al. (2019) and Pellicano et al.

For example, Berenguer (2018) described how students with ASD struggled with managing self-control, hyperactivity, and internalizing behaviors in the inclusion setting. Hodges et al. (2020) concluded that the noted struggles resulted in students with ASD participating less in class and facing more social and academic challenges during cooperative work than their general education peers. Harrison et al. (2019) and Hodges et al. detailed how the concern was further exasperated due to a lack of practical training on working with students with ASD in the general education setting and preparing students with ASD for social situations that students will encounter in the school setting.

Social situations were often challenging for students with ASD. The mainstream environment was not always conducive to helping build the social skills needed to flourish (Leonard & Smyth, 2020). Harrison et al. (2019) considered how students with ASD struggled to manage coping strategies, resulting in fewer positive social interactions and friendships with their peers when placed in the incorrect setting. Negative interactions were illustrated by Pellicano et al. (2018), who considered that when students with disabilities exhibited certain distracting behaviors in the classroom setting, their general-education peers could become frustrated, resulting in an increased likelihood of negative peer-peer interactions. Sarrett (2018) maintained the findings of Pellicano et al.

and conveyed that incorrect placement may also have long-lasting effects, hindering the students' ability to manage emotions and skills in postsecondary education. The social skills deficits were noted in employment and higher education settings (Pallathra et al., 2018).

As the number of students identified with ASD rose, so did the number of students with ASD in higher education (Sarrett, 2018). Students with ASD needed to develop the self-advocacy skills necessary to voice their needs earlier in their educational journey to utilize said skills in higher education (Pallathra et al., 2018). Sarrett examined that higher education students with ASD desired to be taught self-advocacy skills required in the college setting to utilize the protections afforded to them under ADA and Section 504. Scheirer (2020) examined how self-advocacy skills could be taught to students with ASD in their younger academic years using instructional approaches such as the UDL style of learning. UDL style methodologies helped effectively teach students with ASD the skills and tools needed to obtain the necessary social skills for postsecondary school (Scott & Bruno, 2018; Scheirer, 2020).

Symptoms of ASD as it Relates to Social Deficits

Frye (2018) defined ASD as a neurological disorder that affected over 2% of children in the US. Scientists generally agreed that genetics and environmental aspects could also cause ASD, as could also cause ASD, as the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) reported. The NINDS concluded that "studies suggest that ASD could be a result of disruptions in normal brain growth very early in development" (NINDS, 2021). Grob et al. (2019) reported that additional symptoms of ASD could

include social difficulties that consist of problems in conversations and relationships. Other symptoms of ASD could include social challenges such as problems with conversations, relationships, and understanding various social cues. ASD is known to cause deficits in social, emotional, and communicative skills (CDC, 2020). A wide range of abilities is noted in persons diagnosed with ASD and vary from low functioning, requiring lifelong care, to higher functioning, requiring minimal assistance (CDC, 2021; Sharma et al., 2018). Grob et al. explained how children diagnosed with ASD fell within various levels on the autistic spectrum, and their needs differed depending on their severity level; therefore, support and aid should be tailored to each child's individual needs.

In 2016, approximately 1 in 54 children were diagnosed with ASD in the US, rising from 1 in 150 children in 2000. The diagnosis reached all races, ethnicities, and genders. However, boys were four times more likely than girls to be affected (CDC, 2020). Grob et al. (2019) and the CDC credited the drastic increase in diagnosis to changes within the diagnostic process, leading to earlier identification of children diagnosed with ASD. Conversely, Shaughnessy (2020) and Smith et al. (2019) suggested that the increase in diagnosis may also be attributed to an overidentification of students diagnosed with ASD. Shaughnessy affirmed the idea and stated that during initial evaluations, "The initial screening identified approximately 10% of toddlers as possibly having ASD, although 94.8% of those children were excluded in the follow-up interview … meaning that 85% of the children who screened positive for ASD were falsely positive" (p. 630). Regardless of the cause of an increase in diagnosis, Turcotte et al.

(2018) discussed that it was vital to note that the rise in diagnosis also called for an increase in attention and support needed to meet the specialized needs of students with ASD in the school setting. Both Ireri et al. (2019) and Grob et al. reinforced the idea of increased support and the need for increased availability of intervention services that focused on improving the social skills of children with ASD.

The impaired social skills of children and adults living with ASD were associated with a decreased quality of life and increased the likelihood that persons living with ASD would withdraw from social interactions and suffer from anxiety and depression (Walsh et al., 2018). Social impairments affected motivation, anxiety, social cognition, and the social skills of persons with ASD. Pallathra (2018) built upon and reinforced the findings of Walsh et al. and asserted that when combined, the noted impairments increased the likelihood of an unsuccessful transition from childhood to adulthood in children with ASD. Furthermore, increasing anxiety often caused persons with ASD to interact less with their peers (Pallathra, 2018). Although, as described by Van Hees et al. (2018), adult students with ASD and their families reported a positive college experience when the needed supports and resources were offered. Noted in the study is one respondent who declared that, unlike high school, they "perceived the move to college as an opportunity to shed their disliked identities and to construct a new social identity, conforming to the expectations of adulthood" (Van Hees et al., 2018, p. 3301). The use of technology was illustrated by Becht et al. (2020) as being a way to circumvent potential barriers in college life and stated, "students either bring their own or use a desktop computer… the

cell phone and computer programs and apps have created a bridge to opportunity and mastery in the routines of daily college life" (Discussion para. 5).

Pallathra (2018) discussed how frequently persons with ASD lacked the motivation to interact with others or seek social interaction, affecting their ability to form lasting relationships. The lack of motivation led to an increase in anxiety. In addition, those with ASD were generally more sensitive to stress and experienced greater perceived stress (Pallathra, 2018). Ireni et al. (2019) confirmed Pallathra's findings and described how increased anxiety and stress caused debilitating social pressure, potential social avoidance, and increased social impairments. Pallathra agreed with their findings and explained how social anxiety was raised by a decreased understanding of social cognition skills. Social cognition skills included knowledge of non-verbal cues and tones of voice, which were impacted by a lack of social skills development (Pallathra, 2018).

Like Pallatra's (2018) study, Grob et al. (2019) detailed how effective social skills development could help allow children with ASD to initiate conversations and relationships with others. Frye (2018) and Stevenson and Correa (2019) investigated how individuals with ASD faced significant barriers in life due to their limited social skills. Skills included the inability to communicate with peers effectively, a lack of understanding of appropriate social behaviors, and the failure to transfer social skills learned from one setting to another. The barriers often hindered the student's ability to integrate and participate within the community. Gilmore et al. (2020) reinforced that social skills development was vital to efficiently function in the post-school community. Additional researchers noted how effective social skills development helped ensure a

successful transition into society (Frye, 2018; Gilmore et al., 2020). When social skills were effectively taught to children and adults with ASD, students experienced an increase in social functioning, which dictated the ability to transfer skills learned to various settings, including their place of employment (Gilmore et al., 2020; Grob et al., 2019; Stevenson & Correa, 2019).

Adults With ASD in Higher Education and Employment

Generally, adults with ASD faced more barriers to employment than their nondisabled peers due to noted social deficits (Frye, 2018; Pallathra, 2018). Pallathra showed that students who have received social skills training were 5.4 times more likely to be gainfully employed after leaving the school setting. Due to the employment discrepancy, the CDC acknowledged that it is vital to ensure effective therapy and related services are available to children with ASD to help students generalize and use said skills once they are older (CDC, 2022). Pallathra also indicated that limited interventions were studied and implemented for adults with ASD. The limited support made early intervention services vital to equip adults with ASD to transfer social skills taught to them to various settings once teenagers and young adults left the school environment. Additionally, Chancel et al. (2020) and Pellicano et al. (2018) reported how applying the interventions in early childhood could help meet the need for early intervention services and allow students with ASD to reach their maximum potential when teens enter adulthood. Interventions will be discussed in more detail within this chapter.

Pellicano et al. (2018) and Nuske et al. (2019b) detailed how social skills development in teens directly affected outcomes experienced by adults with ASD in the

postsecondary school world. A notable increase in the diagnosis of ASD was examined by Test et al. (2020), who also discussed that the rise in diagnosis did not increase positive post-school outcomes for said children. According to the 2016 National Autism Indicators Report, only 60% of ASD youth in vocational training programs left the program with a job (Test et al., 2020). Regarding higher education, the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) highlighted that only 43.9% of adults with ASD were enrolled in a postsecondary education program, compared to 63.2% of adults with all other disabilities (Test et al., 2020). Oxley and Bernard (2019) strengthened the idea that similar data called for a national response for more resources and tools that helped adults with ASD transition into adulthood to employment or higher education and should include an effective collaborative effort by the CST.

CST members reported decreased training and collaboration experiences during the transition process for teens with ASD, resulting in adverse outcomes for those students when they reached adulthood (Fowler et al., 2019; Hotez et al., 2018; White et al., 2021). IDEA mandated that transitional goals and statements be included in a child's IEP when students turn 14, and statements should consist of input from various stakeholders, including the students. However, Shogren and Wehmeyere (2020) recommended that planning begin much earlier to help increase the likelihood of more positive postsecondary school outcomes, including higher graduation and employment rates (Autism New Jersey, 2019; CDC, 2021; Hotez et al., 2018; IDEA, 2004).

According to Wilhoit (2019), the graduation rate for adults with ASD enrolled in higher education was as low as 20%–30%, which means that 70%–80% of students with

ASD did not finish the academic program they were enrolled in or obtain a college degree. In addition, Elias and White (2018) recalled that there were often concerns around the living situation of adult students with ASD. Frequently, dorms or apartment living may not be conducive to the sensory needs of adults with ASD, which regularly resulted in many students with ASD living at home, or not attending college at all (Elias & White, 2018). Dorms and apartments could be noisy, chaotic, and crowded, triggering sensory overload attacks in some adults with ASD (White et al., 2021). In addition to campus life, college could also bring about concerns regarding the educational needs of adults with ASD (Francis et al., 2018; Sarrett, 2018).

Elias and White (2018) studied how college life could also increase social, emotional, and organizational demands leading to decreased academic performances for adult students with ASD. Since adult students were no longer protected under the IDEA, protection is transferred to ADA and Section 504 (Elias & White, 2018; Sarrett, 2018). Nuske et al. (2019a) conveyed that for ADA and Section 504 protections to apply, adult students with disabilities needed to self-disclose their disability and ask for help. The self-advocacy skills necessary for disclosure were vital to ensure that the adult student's needs were met (Perryman et al., 2020). Similar points were affirmed by Adalarasu et al. (2020), and Zuber and Webber (2019) highlighted that self-advocacy skills were a necessary component of the social skills taught to students with ASD at an early age to receive ADA and Section 504 accommodations. Paradiz et al. (2018) concluded that "learning self-advocacy skills increases the possibility that they will communicate effectively with others, and in turn, positively affect interpersonal relationships" (p. 373).

Protections covered under the ADA and Section 504 included access to reasonable accommodations in the workplace and school setting, the right to confidentiality, and equal access to private and public institutions (ADA, 1990; Section 504, 1973). Students and employees requesting accommodations must present proof of disability; however, the ADA (1990) required that evidence does not have to state the nature of the disability, and an employer or higher education institution is not permitted to require disclosure to receive services. In some cases, services requested may be refused if the services impose an undue financial or administrative burden on the school setting or employment location (ADA, 1990). Regardless of how the protections apply, Alverson et al. (2019) and Elias and White (2018) showed that advocating for the protections relied on students and employees tapping into social and advocacy skills often excluded in academic years.

Elias and White (2018) discussed a well-known need for higher education support to help adults develop and utilize social skills. Rashedi et al. (2021) supported the same idea and described how such skills needed included the ability to self-advocate for one's needs, work collaboratively with their peers, communicate with professors or employers, and manage/self-regulate emotions during potentially stressful situations. Adalarasu et al. (2020) and Snell-Rood et al. (2020) detailed how neglecting social skills had been shown to increase frustration and dropout rates for adult students with ASD leading to an increase in dropout rates. In turn, Lallukka et al. (2020) revealed that students who drop out of higher education programs are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

Increased d frustration was also seen when adults with ASD could not find gainful employment (Adalarasu et al., 2020; Lallukka et al., 2020).

Adults with ASD were more likely to report unemployment than their nondisabled peers and adults with other disabilities (Frank et al., 2018). Although laws, such as the ADA and Section 504, applied to adults with ASD in the workforce, reports indicated that many adults with ASD lacked the skills and support needed to succeed, especially when seeking full-time employment (Elias & White, 2018; Sarrett, 2018). For example, of the 60% of employed adults with ASD who finished vocational training courses, over 80% of the workers were used only part-time, making approximately $160 per week, well below the established federal poverty guidelines (Test et al., 2020). The NTLS also reported that 63.2% of adults with ASD worked since leaving secondary school compared to 91% of adults with all other disabilities (Test et al., 2020). As described by Frank et al. and Vuattoux et al. (2021), this lack of employment could be attributed to a deficiency of social skills training during their school years. The decrease in employment for adults with ASD could be increased when adults suffer from additional comorbid diagnoses (Hossain et al., 2020).

Comorbidity of ASD and Other Diagnoses

Pillai et al. (2021) disclosed that an overwhelming majority of children diagnosed with ASD also had an additional or comorbid diagnosis, the most common being ADHD, intellectual disabilities, and other behavioral disabilities. Their findings were corroborated by Hedley et al. (2019), who added that the similarity in symptoms experienced with the varying diagnoses, identification, and treatments for each disorder

was more complex. The most common comorbid diagnoses affected the mental health of children and adults with ASD (Hossain et al., 2020). Common comorbid diagnoses experienced by children and adults with ASD were oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), anxiety, emotional behavior disorder (EBD), attention deficit disorder (ADHD), depression, and bipolar disorder (Hossain et al., 2020; Stice & Lavner 2019).

The most common comorbid diagnoses were ADHD and anxiety, seen in over 40% of those diagnosed with ASD (Lugo-Marin et al., 2019; Zaboski & Storch, 2018). ODD and EBD also commonly presented themselves in those diagnosed with ASD and generally correlated with a higher severity level of ASD in those diagnosed with both, as described by Lecavalier et al. (2019). Lugo-Marin et al. aligned with the findings of Lecavalier et al., explained how depression and bipolar disorder, along with all other comorbid diagnoses, often further exasperated the symptoms felt by those with ASD, resulting in a decreased quality of life and an increase in the chances of adverse outcomes experienced into adulthood. Lecavalier et al. reported that “The core features of ASD can cause substantial impairments that may be amplified by behavioral and emotional problems” (p. 57). Additionally, Stice and Lavner (2019) concluded that “findings indicate that young adults with stronger autism phenotypes have higher levels of internalizing symptoms and that lower levels of social connectedness and higher levels of loneliness” (p. 1107).

When suffering from ASD and an additional comorbid disorder, those diagnosed with ASD faced more challenges than they would with just ASD alone (Lecavalier et al., 2019). Nuske et al. (2019b) discussed similar concerns and noted that multiple diagnoses

often lead to an increase in frustrations during transitional periods and certain social situations that could exasperate both the ASD diagnosis and the comorbid diagnoses. Lecavalier et al. supported those findings and described how since ASD is rarely seen in isolation and children with ASD often suffered from a comorbid diagnosis, more information was needed that focused on interventions and best practice approaches that helped meet the needs of students who suffered from multiple diagnoses. Training to work with students with ASD and other concurrent disabilities, as indicated by Hutchins et al. (2019), should include intensive social skills training for both the students and the staff charged with meeting the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students with disabilities. Staff also needed to receive adequate and intentional training on practical social skills teaching methods (Cressey, 2020; Carrington et al., 2021).

Social skills development and training could help promote the social, emotional, and behavioral competence of students with disabilities (Hutchins et al., 2019). Craig et al. (2019) reported similar conclusions and expressed how the quality of life could be reduced when students with ASD and additional diagnoses lacked the social skills needed to navigate the school environment. Greuter et al. (2019) described how social skills should be implemented when treatment and interventions occur as early as possible, making early intervention essential in ensuring that students with disabilities could generalize the skills learned to various settings.

Effective Skills Teaching Methods

One of the most preferred instruction models is UDL when considering practical ways of teaching students with ASD the skills and tools needed to function in a

mainstream setting (Kurniansari et al., 2021). Carrington et al. (2020) also revealed how the UDL framework allowed flexibility and accommodations for students of varying learning styles and disabilities. Students with ASD, like those of other varying disabilities, require multiple means of representation, action/expression, and engagement, which are afforded to them under the UDL and UDT framework for curriculum and instruction, as considered by both Kurniasari et al. and Scott and Bruno (2018). Additionally, both researchers presented information on how students with ASD needed specialized instruction to adapt and implement the social skills necessary to function successfully in the classroom and transition to the postsecondary world. Although in agreement with UDL methods, Scott and Bruno relayed concerns with implementing said methods related to general education teacher support for inclusion and understanding of UDL tenets. Their research called for the need for administrative support and additional preservice and in-service field-based training on UDL.

Lobo (2020) and Chauhdry (2019) supported the ideas of Scott and Bruno (2018) and highlighted how methods such as UDL style of teaching allowed for the accessibility of the content for all students, which was proven to decrease the frustrations felt by students with ASD in a general education setting. Once the content was delivered universally, social cues and skills could then be taught to students with ASD, as Chauhdry found. As Stevenson and Correa (2019) realized, social skills training and interventions should ideally occur as early as possible, as early intervention was paramount to success. Zuber and Webber (2019) reaffirmed the recommendation of Stevenson and Correa and stated that social skills should be taught to allow easier

generalizability of said skills to various settings using multiple intervention strategies. UDL-style methodologies are lauded by most in the academic community. However, as realized by Capp (2020), teachers could use no straightforward best practice approach within the classroom to effectively implement social skills that aided in transitional periods for students with ASD. Capp contended that "teachers were unsure how to provide options for recruiting student interest, sustaining student effort and persistence, and supporting student self-regulation" (p. 716).

Ideally, intervention strategies should be individualized for each student and begin during the preschool years since transitions start as early as the move from preschool to kindergarten (Kalinowski et al., 2019). Chauhdry (2019) reported that the individualized aspect of the interventions could help ensure that the interventions are tailored to the needs of each student, as outlined in their IEP, for social and behavioral goals. The interventions involved a more collaborative effort for all school staff, as the roles of special education teachers and general education teachers were changing (Mofield, 2019). General and special education teachers were responsible for implementing a student's IEP (IDEA, 2004).

Though not legally bound, Mofield (2019) contended that all teachers should work with students, and the responsibility to implement all aspects of the IEP fell to all teachers, not just those who act as the special education teacher for the classroom. Alnasser, (2021) argued that although general education teachers were responsible for providing educational services and support to students with disabilities, frequently, communication barriers existed between the general education teacher and the special

education staff. Communication barriers made it hard for general education teachers to receive the support and resources needed to meet their students' needs. Communication barriers could be mitigated by implementing effective communication strategies and PD focused on the CST and IEP processes (Alnasser, 2021). Ansari et al. (2021) concurred with Mofield and concluded that "As schools adopt more inclusive practices to engage students, educators increasingly collaborate and co-teach to meet the needs of diverse learners" (p. 517). The collaborative effort is most notable in schoolwide MTSS programs, as federal law requires (Cressey, 2020; New Jersey Department of Education, 2020).

Within a tiered system approach, students could be taught instruction in small groups, which was an effective means to instruct students with ASD (Sailor et al., 2021). Verschuur et al. (2020) explained how small groups of two to five students allowed instruction to be aligned with the individual instruction needs and included academic and social skills instruction. Once the skills were presented to a student in a scaffolded and consistent manner, students were more likely to understand, practice, and generalize the skills acquired (Zuber & Webber, 2019). As clarified by EIlias and White (2018) and Rashedi et al. (2021), social skills would allow students to practice self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-regulation skills necessary in the various social settings the students would experience. The skills above were vital in school and upon graduation (Elias & White, 2018; Stevenson & Correa, 2019). Stevenson and Correa considered how social skills instruction could help alleviate many of the named barriers to inclusion and transition for students with ASD. Gilmore et al. (2020) supported the findings of

Stevenson and Correa and described how social skills training interventions could enhance the overall social competence of adults with ASD. Additionally, video modeling has been cited as a best practice approach to increase the social communication skills necessary in the workplace for adults with ASD (Fitzgerald et al., 2018).

Nuske et al. (2019b) presented research showing students with ASD and their families reported several challenges transitioning into adulthood successfully; namely, feelings of peer or social incompetence, poor academic performance, a lack of independence or self-management, transitional concerns about lifestyles, and supports once they left school, the ability to generalize skills learned in school to various other settings, as well as increased resistance to change. Lloyd (2019) agreed and asserted that social skills instruction should explore the whole child and focus on connecting and building relationships when circumventing these barriers. Both Nuske et al. and Lloyd reported that a child-centered approach could help ensure that education is centered on the whole child's needs, not just instructional or social concerns alone.

A child or student-centered approach to instruction allowed for the scaffolding of independence and self-advocacy skills needed to help ensure successful transitions within the school setting (Lloyd, 2019). Hutchins et al. (2019) emphasized the vitality of academic instruction in social skills, tailored to each student, taught, and practiced in a group setting. Group settings may include social, counseling, community service, and therapy clinics (Adalarasu et al., 2020; CDC, 2021; Grob et al., 2019; Hutchins et al., 2019). Lloyd supplied an example using an approach that included several daily group sessions outside the classroom. In Lloyd's example, teachers or counselors used role-play

in group settings to prepare the students for field trips, school outings, cafeteria environments, the school bus, and interacting with peers in the classroom. With these outings, the school staff was able to teach students with autism skills that could be "generalized back into the classroom so that students could become confident participating with their peers in class, PE, music, and art lessons, as well as joining them on educational visits" (Lloyd, 2019, p. 20).

Role-play was reinforced by Trudel and Nadig (2019), who described how students could apply learned social skills in an individualized and group settings. Lee (2021) affirmed the conclusions of Trudel and Nadig and identified that appropriate social skills and behavior should be modeled and rehearsed for students with ASD within groups. Rehearsal could include peer-to-peer practice or peer-to-teacher practice. Rashedi et al. (2021) and Platos and Wojaczek (2018) described how community-based social groups could help students with ASD develop the unique skills and self-determination skills necessary to ensure success during transitional periods through practical social skills training techniques.

Social skills training could also help mitigate the named barriers in higher education and employment experienced by adults with ASD (Grob et al., 2019). Adalarasu et al. (2019) supported the findings of Grob et al. and showed how the training should ideally include the behavioral management skills and job-related social skills. The training would help ensure that students could transfer said skills to other locales (Adalarasu et al., 2019; Grob et al., 2019). There are many known methods teachers and

school staff use for teaching social skills to students with ASD; however, current research often highlights best practice approaches (CDC, 2021).

Best-practice methods for teaching social skills included yoga therapy, visual cues, cue cards, music, video modeling, applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy, speech services, occupational therapy, assistive technology, and meditation (Adalarasu et al., 2020; CDC, 2021). Adalarasu et al. explained that using best practice approaches helped decrease stereotypical behavior concerns for students with ASD and helped increase students' concentration and ability to hone the skills taught to them. Lloyd (2019) agreed with the conclusions of Adalarasu et al. and stated that implementing evidence-based practices could help create what is known as an ASD-friendly school. Lloyd reported that "An autism-friendly school is a healthy school, valued by children and parents, fulfilling for staff and of ultimate benefit to society" (p. 21).

Adalarasu et al. (2020) detailed how the approaches have also been proven to help prevent other emotional impairments that may come with the social deficits noted in students with ASD. Hutchins et al. (2019) discussed that best practice methods also helped to address and promote the social, emotional, and behavioral development of students with ASD and built on the ideas of Adalarasu et al. that a whole-school approach was needed to meet the whole child's needs successfully. With a whole school and whole-child approach to teaching, there was an increase in the generalizability skills of students with ASD (Hutchins et al., 2019). Whole school approaches directly affected the transitional experiences of students with ASD once they leave school and should include specific social skills training implemented throughout the day (Adalarasu et al., 2020).

White et al. (2021) researched the same method and recommended what was known as a Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students with ASD (STEPS) program.

The STEPS program helped strengthen self-regulation and self-determination skills for students with ASD to prepare them for adult life. STEPS was a multi-method approach used to create developmentally sensitive transitional programs to support students with ASD, both before students leave for college and after they are already in college (White et al., 2021). Perryman et al. (2020) detailed the benefits of STEPS and found that "the support program valuable in that it helped them consider goals (self-determination), tasks, and daily living skills associated with attending college" (p. 902). The program involved active curriculum collaboration of all educational stakeholders and one-on-one counseling sessions with community outings where students were taught and could practice the self-regulation and self-determination skills needed to succeed as adults (Perryman et al., 2020; White et al., 2021). Adalarasu et al. (2020). Supported the central tenets of the UDT methodology, which sought to adequately equip students with disabilities with the social skills needed to handle transitions in life.

School staff should follow educational models that help promote social and emotional learning (SEL) when looking to increase the social skills of students with ASD. SEL development is essential to encourage all students' academic and psychological progression (Elliot et al., 2021; Zolkoski et al., 2021). Gardner et al. (2021) reviewed how incorporating SEL teaching skills required the fidelity of use from all school staff in a collaborative manner and positively impacted all students' social skills. Elliot et al. aligned with the findings of Gardner et al. and determined that SEL

development could be achieved using various models that may differ within each school. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) model was a research-based best practice approach that has influenced SEL policy within all 50 states (Elliot et al., 2020).

Elliot et al. (2021) studied how the CASEL model for SEL incorporated many of the same skills promoted under the UDT and UDL models, which helped develop social skills for students with ASD. The components of the CASEL model included the promotion of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which was also noted by Scheirer (2020). Elliot et al. discussed that the CASEL model also called for the use of a diagnostic measure known as the Devereaux Students Strengths Assessment (DESSA).

The DESSA is an eight point assessment that looks to assess the overall social competency of students in a manner that helps identify students who are struggling with SEL and social skills (Elliott et al., 2021). Both Elliott et al. and Zolkoski et al. (2021) indicated how earlier identification of strengths and weaknesses in social skills allowed for implementing interventions earlier and decreased the likelihood of adverse outcomes for all students. The CASEL helped reduce dropout rates within schools by promoting academic and psychological growth and indicated that SEL skills should be utilized throughout the day (Elliott et al., 2021; Zolkoski et al., 2021). Elliott et al. promoted the use of DESSA within an SEL model as it helped to show “promise to advance SEL focused assessment in schools and addresses researchers’ needs for efficient assessment”

(Elliott et al., 2021, p. 179). Brief assessments allowed a more streamlined way to identify struggling students and their academic and social needs (Elliott et al., 2021).

McCallops et al. (2019) incorporated many similar findings to that of both Elliott et al. (2021) and Zolkoski et al. (2021) and strengthened the argument that instruction that utilized and understood all students' lived experiences helped promote SEL learning within the school setting. Researchers found that teachers should use and incorporate students' views and interests within their instruction in an empathetic and culturally responsive manner (McCallops et al., 2019; Zolkoski et al., 2021). Similar findings are reported by Elliott et al., who indicated that utilizing teaching tools which taught to the whole child could help ensure that student perspectives are included in all aspects of the classroom. For this whole-child method to occur, teachers should receive training on their students' social and cultural backgrounds to build intercultural relations and promote SEL growth (Elliott et al., 2021).

McCallops et al. (2019) stated that SEL type supports helped to "support individuals in understanding and managing emotions, effectively setting and achieving goals, gaining empathy toward others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships" (p. 13). Once SEL occurred throughout the school setting, there was a known and direct positive impact on students' social skills, resulting in an education that teaches the whole child due to a whole-school approach (Elliott et al., 2021). Whole-school strategies included the practical, consistent, and ongoing training of all school staff (Elliott et al., 2021; McCallops et al., 2019).

Teacher Concerns Related to PD and Perceived Self-Efficacy

Fowler et al. (2019) discussed a distinguished difference between general education and special education teachers working with students with ASD in the school setting. Harrison et al. (2019) reported similar findings and added that the same is also said for preservice teachers who have undergone extensive formalized training on inclusion, and in-service teachers, who relied on practice PD sessions to help them improve their skills. Additional research on the same topic by Ansari Ricci et al. (2021) and Carrington et al. (2020) discovered that preservice teachers tended to have a more positive outlook or perceived self-efficacy on inclusion, which is an idea that is further cemented when teachers had received a higher quality formalized education on inclusion and various disability needs within their classrooms. Ansari Ricci et al. reported that "preservice teachers who get the opportunity to implement co-teaching models during their practicum in their teacher training programme may be better prepared for K-12 teaching positions …as the potential for them to influence student achievement is significant" (p. 526).

Hutzler et al. (2019) aligned with those of Ansari Ricci et al. (2021) and explained that research pointed to the notion that novice teachers tended to look more favorably at the inclusion of students with ASD and their ability to teach them social skills needed to work with them daily. Lee (2019) and Lobo (2020) reported much of this hesitation stemmed from in-service teachers who were often reluctant to break away from the old model or old way of educating students with disabilities. Lee noted that delays with changing an instructional approach were attributed mainly to the education and training

received by in-service teachers. Training included any previous experience, formal training, or direct contact/exposure to working with children of varying levels of ASD and directly affected the perceived self-efficacy of school staff to implement instructional strategies taught to them (Ansari Ricci et al., 2021). Devi and Ganguly (2022) revealed how perceived self-efficacy positively correlated with teachers' understanding of ASD. Roberts and Webster (2020) showed how more emphasis was needed in research on implementing practical strategies when working with students with ASD, including a strong need for thorough teacher preparation courses specific to ASD. Love et al. (2019) found that the perceived self-efficacy of teachers as it relates to working with students with ASD depended on factors pertaining to PD efficacy and concluded that teacher efficacy was directly related to the "interplay of self-control variables, like self-regulation, and self-efficacy can be informative in teacher training programs that consider both personal factors and knowledge factors when preparing teachers for working with any student, and particularly for working with students with ASD" (Love et al., 2019, p. 47).

Both veteran and novice teachers often reported a lack of understanding of the characteristics of ASD, primarily related to the extensive spectrum of needs, abilities, and behaviors associated with the disorder (Devi & Ganguly, 2022). Love et al. (2019) also discussed how research pointed to a need for more formalized in-service and preservice training on working with students with varying levels of ASD in the school and classroom setting. Both Bertuccio et al. (2019) and Love et al. recognized that teachers reported a lack of educational opportunities or practical PD to aid them in working with

students with ASD. Stephenson et al. (2021) further added that when specific training, such as PD specific to working with students with ASD, was neglected, obstacles were created that affected potential successful inclusionary practices within the school setting. Typical PD sessions within a school setting revolved around academic content and teaching the curriculum to students with disabilities (Adalarasu et al., 2020). Effective PD focused on social skills in various settings was inconsistently noted in training courses (Bertuccio et al., 2019; Hsiao & Sorensen, 2019).

Love et al. (2019) documented obstacles to school staff implementing schoolwide inclusion for students with ASD in the general education setting and teaching them the social skills needed to succeed. The barriers noted directly affected the perceived self-efficacy of school staff to implement the instructional strategies taught. Adalarasu et al. (2020) and Fowler et al. (2019) described obstacles as being a lack of specialized training, not enough time devoted to collaboration or practice of learned skills, insufficient support from school and district personnel, poor teacher attitudes, and inadequate perception of their knowledge of ASD.

Harrison et al. (2019) built upon the findings of Hsiao and Sorenson (2019) and conveyed that teachers and school staff often described a training deficiency related to working with students with ASD and meeting their social and academic needs within the general education setting. Additionally, Walsh et al. (2019) discussed how schools reported a need for more effective and relatable PD within the school setting that allowed them to practice and hone the skills needed to effectively teach students with ASD the social skills required to succeed in the school setting. Comparable findings are reported

by Grob et al. (2019), and Pallathra et al. (2018), who concluded that when training is present, it is often centered around the differentiation of instructional needs, but not as much attention was paid to the social needs of students with ASD. When that ASD-specific PD was offered, it was generally a one-time training, and refresher PD sessions were usually not implemented or delivered (Adalarasu et al., 2020).

Several studies described the dearth of time as one of the most significant themes related to working with students with ASD (Alverson et al., 2019; Fowler et al., 2019). Fowler et al. recognized that the lack of time reported could include time to collaborate, plan, and implement aspects of a child's IEP goals within the school day. Fowler et al. found that the time allocated to collaborate with special education peers and other IEP team members was also a potential barrier to implementing inclusive practices and social skills interventions for students with ASD. According to Sterret et al. (2018), time dedicated to collaboratively planning was as minimal as 30 minutes once every 2 weeks. Furthermore, daily planning time, which averages as high as 90 minutes, is often interrupted by staff meetings, coverages, and other duties that prevent staff from using that time to plan and prevented staff from working with the IEP team to understand the in-depth needs of a given IEP (Fowler et al., 2019; Sterret et al., 2018).

Fowler et al. (2019) discussed how general education teachers also desired more accessible and quicker access to IEP documents to understand each child's needs better. Similar outcomes were noted by Scott (2018), who identified a lack of time to explain why individualized supports cannot consistently be implemented as written. When explicitly asked about planning time, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) report

concluded that 79% of educators reported no time or insufficient time to plan lessons. Another 86% of school staff stated that inadequate time was provided to prepare partners, and 89% recounted little or no time to collaborate with the IEP team to better understand their student's needs (Fowler et al., 2019). Alverson et al. (2019) and Devi and Ganguly (2022) detailed information that showed that teachers acknowledged that students with ASD come with academic and social needs, as outlined in their IEP. However, as Capp (2020) reported, teachers described more time needed to plan specific instruction from the case managers and special education leadership members on where and how to implement IEP goals within the school day. When looking at social skills goals/training goals outlined within the IEP, this need for more time was evident and often neglected (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). In addition to time, school personnel often looked to the school administration to implement strategies learned during PD sessions (Webster & Litchka, 2020).

In a recent report released by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Fowler et al. (2019) reported that school staff, including teachers and paraprofessionals, relayed their concerns that they felt unequipped to work with students with disabilities in a general education setting. Fowler et al. indicated that "of concern is the fact that very low respondents rated highly the preparation of general education collogues or paraprofessionals, who are often are charged with supported special education services" (p. 15). Fowler et al. concluded that the respondents reported a lack of training and support to meet the needs of all their students with disabilities within the general

education setting, which hindered their ability to effectively meet the needs of their students (Webster & Litchka, 2020).

Fowler et al. (2019) noted that when looking at school leadership, 18-50% of special education and general education teachers believed that special education services within their district could provide the resources needed to implement all the IEPs within the school setting. The same report indicated that school staff felt that 26% of principals and 53% of special education supervisors were capable (Flower et al., 2019). In addition, Leithwood et al. (2020) examined the idea that effective school leadership improves teaching and learning by enhancing the classroom and school conditions and promoting interactions between all stakeholders.

Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2020) pointed out that leadership styles are more democratic and include input from school staff in the decision-making process, as the leadership role or decision-making process is shared and balanced (Leithwood et al., 2020). Webster and Litchka (2020) concluded that "effective school leadership includes many abilities and behaviors that have evolved over the past century, including leading and managing the school in an inspiring and empowering manner" (p. 43).

Fowler et al. (2019) reported that a scarcity of school and district personnel support was often identified as the rationale behind a failure to successfully work with students with ASD in the general education setting, which aligned with the findings reported by Webster and Litchka (2020). Leithwood et al. (2020) added to Webster and Litchka's study and conveyed that when teachers and school staff tended to view the climate or culture within the school positively, staff self-perceived efficacy was

increased. Additionally, successful inclusionary practices were more likely to occur when there was a reported positive climate within the school (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2019).

Leonard and Smyth (2020) described similar findings when teachers had a more positive outlook on inclusionary tactics during PD; teachers were more inclined to have a more positive experience working with students with ASD. Devi and Ganguly (2022) pointed out that teacher efficacy believed that the teacher could bring about the actions needed to carry out a particular task regarding inclusion successfully. Additionally, teachers perceived self-efficacy in implementing the social skills necessary to work with students with ASD in the classroom reflected their outlook on inclusion (Khalil et al., 2020). Ryan and Mathews (2022) determined similar findings and proposed that to successfully practice effective inclusionary tactics when working with students with ASD; teachers must first know about the disorder and the varying needs.

Fowler et al. (2019) highlighted the idea that school staff reported a lack of understanding of the wide range of needs and abilities when working with students with ASD. The lack of experience was explicitly related to social skills training. When the absence of knowledge of ASD is prevalent, teachers were more likely to identify students with ASD as inappropriate and disruptive to the school setting (Leonard and Smyth, 2020). The CEC report affirmed the notion and indicated that only 8% of general education teachers felt prepared to work with students with ASD, and 11% of paraprofessionals, 56% of special education teachers, and 67% of related services providers indicated the same (Fowler et al., 2019).

Many teachers' perceptions are attributed to inadequate training and teaching practices (Fowler et al., 2019). Recent researchers indicated a noted gap in practice when implementing more widespread training specific to ASD and inclusionary tactics for students with ASD, utilizing social skills training within the general education setting (Alverson et al., 2019; Kalinowski et al., 2019).

Evaluation of ASD-Related PD

Little research has been conducted on what constitutes effective PD that assists teachers in teaching students with ASD the social skills needed to succeed in the school environment (Kalinowski et al., 2019). Bates and Morgan (2018) examined that collaboration was the key to success when implementing new training or programs within a school. The successful implementation of PD was described by McCray et al. (2021) as requiring faith in school leadership and cooperation amongst staff and a well-planned and thought-out process involving all school staff. PD affects student achievement. Thus, as observed by Keiler (2021), professional development must remain student-centered and student-focused while providing for the needs and desires of the school staff. Lofthouse (2019) added Keiler's findings and reported that the effectiveness of PD also relied on the availability of content-focused academics, the incorporation of areas that target teachers' professional interests, and the usage of coaching and expert support. Similar findings were also indicated by Prast et al. (2018), who found that when teachers are explicitly trained on differentiation techniques for diverse learners, significant improvement in student achievement was noted within one school year.

Regarding PD explicitly related to ASD, Hsiao and Peterson (2018) and Knight et al. (2018) presented information highlighting evidence-based practices focusing on social skills instruction. Elliott et al. (2021) added that PD should also concentrate on SEL goals and be offered to staff throughout the school year. PD specific to ASD is required within New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Education, 2019).

Teachers in New Jersey obtain permanent certifications to complete initial certification requirements for their area of preference. Additionally, New Jersey has no mandatory courses or training to keep one's certificate current specific to working with students with disabilities, other than annual reading disability training and training for MTSS programs utilized by the local district (NJDOE, 2015; NJDOE, 2019). The certification requirement contrasts with neighboring states. For example, to receive permanent teaching certification in New York, a teacher must have at least 2 years of teaching experience in a public-school setting and obtain a master's degree (New York State Education Department, 2019). In Pennsylvania, teachers must complete the Act 48 Continuing Professional Education requirements every 5 years to keep their certifications active (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2021). Knight et al. (2018) found that school staff must receive PD regularly to keep up with best practice techniques when working with students with ASD when there is a lack of additional renewal training. The same study reported that a "number of special educators reported implementing Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) regularly, but fewer numbers reported receiving training on the same EBP in the last 12 months" (p. 13).

Kalinowski et al. (2019) outlined that the effectiveness of specific PD programs depended on various factors, including the willingness of the teachers and school staff to implement strategies learned, the expertise of the facilitators presenting the training, duration of the sessions/PD program, use of research-based techniques, time to implement practices learned, and availability of resources and supports within the school setting. Adding to the results of Kalinowski et al., Hsiao and Sorenson (2019) indicated that each factor helped determine the likelihood of successful implementation of training learned during staff PD when looked at separately. The success then directly affected the perceived self-efficacy of staff to implement said training (Hsiao & Sorenson, 2019).

Kalinowski et al. (2019) specified that the potential success of in-service PD was often tied to the staff and teachers' willingness to implement their teaching strategies. Hsiao and Sorenson (2019) added to the idea of Kalinowski et al. by reporting that desire was usually affected by teachers' available resources and areas of need. Therefore, to meet the needs of attending teachers, practical and relevant PD sessions that provide training on how to deliver accommodations within the classroom setting are needed (Kalinowski et al., 2019; Hsiao and Sorenson, 2019). When training does not allow staff to observe best practices for implementing social skills, professional development was less likely to be successful, as Kalinowski et al. reported. Alverson et al. (2019) concluded that many teachers were unsure whether to prioritize academics or social skills and said a lack of time to implement both concurrently, during the class period, or during the school day. Vincent and Ralston (2020) added that school staff felt uncertain about

scaffolding social skills training for students with ASD and where and when training should occur.

When considering in-service training sessions, Kalinowski et al. (2019) noted that the duration was often one of the leading causes or predictors of the session's effectiveness. PD sessions offered on a rotating basis, rather than just a one-time session, were more likely to have a longer-lasting impact, as realized by Kalinowski et al. Furthermore, if the training facilitators were experts in their field and used research-based theory and knowledge, training was generally more effective, increasing and promoting staff buy-in (Kalinowski et al., 2019; Lloyd, 2019). Kalinowski et al. described how buy-in increased when staff had adequate time to implement the strategies learned.

Staff require time to collaborate, practice, and hone their skills using best practice approaches, as Bruck et al. (2021) stated. Increased effective collaboration occurred when staff had the necessary resources and tools to implement their training (Kalinowski et al., 2019). Bertuccio et al. (2019) described how failure to allow the collaborative effort could result in the school staff's inability to implement the skills and tools needed during training. PD was also proven to increase its effectiveness when staff was afforded reflective opportunities to think about their practices and implement the new approaches within their setting (Bertuccio et al., 2019). Roberts and Webster (2021) considered how the reflective practice could help ensure a professional environment that promoted a curriculum accessible to all students, including those with ASD. Bertuccio et al. and Roberts and Webster agreed that when school administration offered additional support and resources, the increased support increased the chances that school staff would feel

confident enough to enact tools and techniques taught during PD. Increased support would raise staff's perceived self-efficacy, as evidenced by Kalinowski et al. and Bruck et al.

Woodcock and Woolfson (2019) revealed how teachers reported a desire for systematic support from school administration to implement practical tools and training within their classrooms at all levels. As Bruck et al. (2021) described, support encompassed providing staff access to relevant and specialized PD opportunities conducted by experts in their field. Roberts and Webster (2021) added that along with PD, the administration should ensure that staff has the necessary resources to implement said strategies, including budgetary allotments to allow staff to obtain the resources required to meet the needs of their students. Additionally, Hsiao and Sorensen (2019) noted that special education teachers desire a more open form of communication with administration, including seeking help with non-teaching additional duties, lightening their workload, and focusing more on implementing strategies learned during PD into the classroom. Doing so would allow educators increased opportunities for growth (Anderson et al., 2019).

Multiple researchers discussed how providing opportunities for professional growth would help increase teachers perceived self-efficacy to implement the social skills techniques taught during PD sessions (Alverson et al., 2019; Kalinowski, 2019; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). Additionally, Hsiao and Sorensen (2019) discussed how professional growth could also be assured via effective coaching from administrative and supervisory personnel to offer constructive feedback and the modeling of best practice

approaches in a collaborative manner. The increased use of coaching was supported by Bates and Morgan (2018), who added that coaching allowed for growth that would increase job satisfaction rates, which positively impacted how teachers felt about implementing social skills strategies in their classrooms when working with students with ASD.

Hsiao and Peterson (2018) concluded that practices and techniques taught to teachers during PD for students with ASD should focus on the most up-to-date, evidence-based practices. Research indicated that fewer than 15% of teachers had training in teaching strategies specific to working with students with ASD, demonstrating a need to incorporate ASD-specific techniques into the curriculum (Elliott et al., 2021; Hsiao & Peterson, 2018). The evidence-based practices were supported by Knight et al. (2018), who also found that teachers could utilize the strategies by incorporating SEL and social skills techniques within their classroom. Additional practices included positive classroom management techniques, behavioral support, the use of ABA style techniques, technology implementation, antecedent-based interventions, and prompting SEL techniques (Elliott et al., 2021; Hsiao & Peterson, 2018).

SEL techniques could help school staff build relationships and incorporate the social skills needed within their everyday instructional approaches (Elliott et al., 2021). Hsiao and Peterson's (2018) findings indicated that "very few teacher preparation programs offer more than a 6-hour training in evidence-based practices" (p. 205), showing a need for more effective PD programs explicitly geared towards working with

students with ASD (Hsiao & Peterson, 2018). Elliott et al. discussed how curriculum practices could be blended with SEL techniques to teach the whole child.

Bates and Morgan (2018) discussed effective ways that training could be provided to all school staff to encourage a more positive outlook regarding the idea of inclusion. Lessner-Listiakova and Preece (2020), highlighted that once school staff had a more positive attitude regarding inclusion, staff were also more likely to have a positive outlook on inclusion within a school setting. Rodden et al. (2020) built on the notion that school staff was more likely to continuously practice effective inclusionary methods within their classroom, positively emphasizing effective social skills techniques. Research showed that a positive attitude was directly tied to the training and support teachers felt from school administration (Gilmour and Wehby, 2020) Keiler (2018) and Gilmour and Wehby described that when teachers effectively taught students with ASD the social skills needed, students were more likely to feel equipped with the necessary social skills and tools required to function in the school environment. Effective instruction could also help them function during continued transitional times in their lives (Bates & Morgan, 2018; D’Agostino & Douglas, 2020; Keiler, 2018).

An increase in teacher confidence in working with students with ASD was shown when programs were more targeted toward working with students with ASD, as evident by Knight et al. (2018). Their research suggested that PD’s focus on implementing evidence-based practices was limited for students with ASD and other intellectual disabilities. Knight et al. indicated that “unfortunately, special educators, including those who teach students with ASD and [intellectual disabilities], often rely on untested,

ineffective, and even harmful instructional methods" (p. 3). Elliott et al. (2021), Hsiao and Peterson (2018), and Knight et al. revealed that PD often centered around academic content that lacked focus on implementing social skills or SEL skills within the classroom for students with ASD. A lack of focus on social skills, as documented by Elliott et al., hindered the ability of teachers to meet academic goals due to behaviors that may inhibit a student's academic performance. Knight et al. described how an IEP also generally included social and behavioral goals, and PD that incorporated best practice techniques to work with students with ASD could help meet the behavioral goals, allowing teachers to focus on academic pursuits.

Consequently, as Alverson et al. (2019) concluded, it was vital that school staff felt ready to instruct students with ASD on social skills needs. Therefore, staff needed to be provided with the necessary time and the resources to implement said strategies effectively to meet student needs. Fayette and Bond (2018) described how failure to do so could affect the likelihood of a successful transition to adulthood.

Transitional Experiences of ASD Youth and Adults

Teens and young adults with ASD often suffered from social impairments, including repetitive behavior, a lack of eye contact, and deficits in social skills that influence their ability to participate in activities, such as schooling or employment with their nondisabled peers (Sharma et al., 2018). Fayette and Bond (2018) reported similar findings and discussed how childhood experiences could negatively impact transitions from their teenage years to adulthood. Recent research showed several factors that affected the likelihood of a successful transition into adulthood for teenagers and

young adults with ASD (First et al., 2019). Fayette and Bond, along with Havlicek and Bilaver (2021), described the factors as the individual motivation of the student, the level of disability of the student, support from family and school, and any other mitigating factors that may occur during their school years. Nuske et al. (2019a) and First et al. reported similar findings and explained how transitions within education began as early as 6 years old, and school staff was often unprepared to aid students with ASD. Moreover, Nuske et al. noted three main school settings characteristics (school characteristics, school and staff resources, and school and staff interactivity) that often resulted in negative transitional experiences for students with ASD.

Nuske et al. (2019a) expanded on the idea that students with ASD had difficulties with transitions that began as early as preschool to kindergarten and continued through adulthood. Alverson et al. (2019) reported similar findings to that of Nuske et al. (2019b) and disclosed that frequently students with ASD reported difficulties with social adjustments and learning how to function in new settings. The reported difficulties lowered their mental health ability and caused poor peer relations due to the lack of the development of social skills. Furthermore, when the routines and daily functions of a child with ASD were disturbed, an increase in anxiety and a decrease in mental health occurred (Alverson et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2019a). Nuske et al. (2019a) described how anxiety could begin as early as kindergarten and often manifested as difficulty managing angst and interaction with peers and teachers, especially if the student suffered from a communication delay. Nuske et al. (2019b) relayed how parents also felt anxiety and described increased anxiety due to poor communication and collaboration with the

school. The parent claimed, "I don't really feel that I have a solid relationship with them. I think it's because I am disappointed … I don't really participate that much with them anymore because I don't find the service that great" (Nuske et al., 2019b, p. 135).

When a student with ASD transitioned into secondary school, communication and anxiety concerns increased and included additional challenges: transportation challenges, motivation for life after secondary school, and more social pressures from peers (Nuske et al., 2019a). Nuske et al. (2019a) concluded that ineffective communication with peers and teachers often negatively impacted their school experience in high school settings. An example noted by Stack et al. (2021) and First et al. (2019), found that due to social limitations associated with ASD, high school students with ASD often experienced difficulty communicating with their classmates, which often brought about an increase in frustrations and anxiety. Interestingly, Stack et al. also found conflicting evidence that many high school students also reported a positive high school experience regarding peer relations. Stack et al. concluded that "recognizing the importance of peer relationships, research has identified the need for peers to be included in any intervention that supports the transition to secondary school" (p. 9).

Fayette and Bond (2018) found that students with ASD were more likely to report negative high school experiences without implementing support and intervention strategies. Students were more likely to harbor negative feelings toward secondary school life due to social pressures when they reported damaging incidents (First et al., 2019). Analogous findings were evident by Nuske et al. (2019b) and Nuske et al. (2019a). Students with ASD reported that their secondary school experiences negatively impacted

them later as adults (Nuske et al., 2019b). An example can be seen in the same study, where Nuske et al. (2019b) highlighted adult students with ASD who reported that due to a lack of support in secondary schooling, they felt as though their college experience was one "where routine and structure is often lacking, educational spaces are often much larger and overwhelming, and access to support requires an increased level of self-awareness, and a reliance on a student's ability and willingness to self-disclose and to seek support" (Nuske et al., 2019b, p. 281).

Shogren and Wehmeyer (2020) discussed how adults with ASD expressed concerns about not being taught the appropriate secondary school skills to help them learn more about their disability and provide them with the motivation and support needed in higher education or an employment setting. Vincent (2019) concluded that is a need for "autism-specific training and guidance … to ensure that they are informed about the specific needs that this group may have; access to a careers/transition mentor who could facilitate the wider transition to employment and other aspects of adulthood" (p. 1583). Fayette and Bond (2018) demonstrated how transitions associated with elementary to secondary school students often increased academic pressure and workload demands. The demand was increasingly evident when the students entered higher education (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Nuske et al., 2019b).

Students from families with a higher income are more likely to enroll in institutions of higher learning than students from lower-income families, a notion that is true for all students with disabilities, not just those with ASD (Eilenberg et al., 2019). Fayette and Bond (2018) reported similar conclusions and noted that the likelihood of

attending a higher education institution is often attributed to more support in elementary and secondary school settings and homes. According to Alverson et al. (2019) and Shogren and Wehmeyer (2020), the first few years of college were the hardest, as there was more likely to be a lack of awareness of their ability or disability, an increase in stemming, trouble finding their classes and books, difficulty understanding syllabi, and practicing time management skills needed to be successful in a college environment. Nevertheless, Alverson et al. and Wilhoit (2019) showed that adults with ASD had an approximately 20%–30% graduation rate from an institution of higher learning compared to the 62% overall rate of all students. These findings could be attributed to the lack of educational and social skills taught to students with ASD in elementary and secondary school settings. Furthermore, the attrition rate was credited to students not obtaining the needed accommodations in a college environment (Alverson et al., 2019; Brey 2021; Wilhoit, 2019).

Nuske et al. (2019a) reported that many adults with ASD conveyed a lack of formal accommodations, including extended time, preferential seating, and communication assistance in college. A deficiency of accommodations was often due to the lack of knowledge regarding their disability protections once IDEA protections no longer apply. Students reported a need to practice self-advocacy skills as protection under ADA (Nuske et al., 2019a; Nuske et al., 2019b). Section 504 dictated that persons with a disability must self-disclose their disability, which requires skills often not taught to them and their earlier years (Alverson et al., 2019; Moody & Laugeson, 2020; Van Hees et al., 2018; Zuber and Webber, 2019). Zuber and Weber discussed how a lack of self-advocacy

training added to the social anxiety felt by students with ASD, reducing their desire to participate with their classmates, participate in on-campus activities, or communicate concerns with their classmates and professors, and advisors. Alverson et al. noted how a reduced desire to interact with their peers frequently led to additional social impairments, such as limited conflict resolution skills or limited self-advocacy ability regularly notable in the college setting.

Significant social impairments in college affect adults with ASD and their ability to create and maintain friendships and communicate with school staff, including professors (Alverson et al., 2019). Eilenberg et al. (2019) studied how communication deficits could negatively impact their grades and education. Sosnowy et al. (2018) reported similar findings and added that students with ASD suffered from social isolation. One of the most known barriers to success for college students with ASD was the social skills deficits concerning their peers and their ability to form lasting friendships, as noted in both studies (Alverson et al., 2019; Sosnowy et al., 2018). Social skills deficiencies could affect a college student’s ability to manage difficult roommate situations and navigate large and noisy dorm buildings (Ceja & Kranzow, 2020). Usually, college students with ASD prefer single rooms that are not always offered (Sosnowy et al., 2018). Sosnowy et al. described how experiences in college often shaped the perceptions adults with ASD had concerning transitions throughout their life. Participants reported feeling woefully unprepared to navigate the college setting. One participant noted:

> They made it sound really great … but when we got there, we found out that all of these supports really weren't there. We kind of had to create them … they had a disability services office, but there wasn't any special mentoring or anything like that. (p. 33)

Many adults with ASD looked back on their transitional experiences throughout school and higher education and reported a desire for a more coordinated and collaborative effort for their transition team (Nuske et al., 2019a; Nuske et al., 2019b).

In addition, Sosnowy et al. (2018) reported that adults with ASD often expressed a desire for more related and community services, stemming from the effective collaboration of those related services within elementary and secondary schools. Alverson et al. (2019) supported similar findings and indicated that students with ASD desire more training on self-care, daily living skills, and how to advocate for themselves as adults without the need for parental supervision or support. All adults did not share similar experiences with ASD; as noted by Accardo et al. (2019), where one student reported that success was noted for them when they began "trying new things, making new friends, and most important learning about yourself and what works for you. These things lead to success since they have all made me be helped and go further than I imagined" (p. 4883).

Students and adults with ASD reported a longing for more independence in their home life, decreasing parental control in their lives, as detailed by Nuske et al. (2019b). Adults with ASD also called for more autonomy in making decisions. Respondents within the study of Sosnowy et al. (2018) also say that although their parents helped

guide them through their education, including higher education, they have not received the same support or encouragement to find employment. Many adults with ASD, within the results of Nuske et al. (2019a), expressed a desire for more training on employment skills, daily living skills, managing finances, and organizational skills to help them succeed in their life after secondary school. Sosnowy et al. noted how the students felt their diagnosis got in the way of their educational and employment goals once they left the secondary school setting. Burke et al. (2020) affirmed the ideas of Sosnowy et al. and noted that the negative feelings toward their diagnosis are expressed more in adults who wished to enter the workforce. In their study, Burke et al. concluded that proper interventions and support are needed at an earlier age as "skills associated with self-determination, including choice-making, decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, planning, self-management, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-knowledge, enable students with disabilities to make purposeful major decisions and daily choices in their lives" (Burke et al., 2020).

Nuske et al. (2019b) described how working adults with ASD self-identified several barriers to successful employment. One of the most significant barriers was the lack of accommodations necessary to complete their job-related tasks. The findings of Sosnowy et al. (2019) supported comparable conclusions and added that a shortage of accommodations might be attributed to a lack of self-advocacy skills. Often, adults with ASD claimed to have trouble practicing self-advocacy skills as they did not feel adequately trained during their school years (Sosnowy et al., 2018; Zuber and Webber, 2019). Adults with ASD reflected on their childhood and desired more intervention

programs focused on the vocational skills needed to succeed in the workplace (Nuske et al., 2019a). Therefore, the support during childhood directly affected the experiences felt by adults with ASD in the workforce and higher education, as reported by Alverson et al. (2019) and Sosnowy et al. Sosnowy et al. recounted the experiences of a participant who stated, "I landed a job once, but I forgot to take my medicine that day … so I kind of ran out crying … they fired me after that" (p. 36). The unfortunate experience was credited to a lack of skills taught to the student to allow them to function more independently once students left the school setting" (Sosnowy et al., 2018).

Alverson et al. (2019) and Nuske et al. (2019b) discussed the transition to adulthood as a critical developmental period for adults and students with ASD and indicated students' transitional experiences in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary school helped set their path as adults with ASD. Numerous adults with ASD expressed significant difficulty receiving services and adapting to changes once exiting the school setting (Van Hees et al., 2018). Lee et al. (2021) described how the lack of services added stress for individuals living with ASD and increased their desire to change who they are to feel accepted by society.

Anderson et al. (2020) described camouflaging as when persons with disabilities attempted to mimic socially acceptable behavior by changing their behaviors and traits to feel accepted by society. Camouflaging can begin in preschool years and could be present through adulthood, and often resulted in a missed or late diagnosis, especially in females, as it tended to hide the true nature of their disability. Francis et al. (2018) discussed that suppressing symptoms could negatively impact the quality of life for adults living with

ASD. Anderson et al. explained that when adults with ASD camouflage or hide their behaviors to assimilate, it increased anxiety and pressure to constantly be somebody else, leading to increased stress and exhaustion. The use of camouflaging was reinforced by Sosnowy et al. (2018), who further described how adults with ASD often needed to mimic their neurotypical peers' behavior to be what society deemed successful when interacting with their nondisabled peers. One participant in the study conducted by Anderson et al. stated, "I am probably pretty good at the whole masking thing...and, I can just go in and I can be this person for 20 min and then I'll go home, and I'll deal with whatever the aftermath is later" (p. 2893). Other stakeholders also described similar experiences concerning the transitional practices when working with students and adults with ASD (Alverson et al., 2019).

Perceptions of Parents and Teachers of Students with ASD

Parents and staff members of students with ASD reported a lack of collaborative efforts regarding the transitional process for students with ASD (Alverson et al., 2019). Francis et al. (2018) aligned with Alverson et al. and noted that the transitional process should include input from relevant professionals and ongoing collaborative efforts involving families, school staff, experts, and students. Parents of students and adults with ASD reported increased stress because of the increasing pressure placed on their children. Nuske et al. (2019a) described how parents voiced a desire for their children to maintain friendships and have a school experience free from hardships and bullying. The same conclusions were reached by Alverson et al., who asserted that parents also wished that positive experiences continued into adulthood. Nuske et al. (2019a) reported that parents

detailed substantial gaps in the organized transitional system for their children, which began as early as the transition from kindergarten to elementary school. The researchers indicated that "many parents reported challenges in striking a balance between nurturing the parent-teacher relationship and advocating for children's rights and thought that school staff often perceived them as overprotective" (Nuske et al., 2019b, p. 313). Transition gaps were also more prominent in low-income families or families of minority children diagnosed with ASD (Eilenberg et al., 2019).

Elias and White (2018) discussed how federal law required parental involvement and was crucial for any transitional or academic plan for all students with disabilities, which aligned with the central tenets of IDEA (2004). Nuske et al. (2019a) detailed how parents' increased stress and anxiety were often attributed to their feeling ill-equipped to help their child. Elias and White observed increased pressure and credited it to the lack of support offered to the students by a school system, such as a lack of training to understand the jargon used by school personnel during IEP meetings and parent conferences. The knowledge gap extended to parents and was visible when parents could not fully comprehend how their child's disability affected academics (Elias & White, 2018; Nuske et al., 2019b). Parents also reported a fear of judgment being passed on by school personnel due to ignorance. The findings of Nuske et al. (2019b) correlated with the conclusions drawn from Nuske et al. (2019a) and explained how fear of judgment and an inability to help their child was often present during IEP meetings (Nuske et al., 2019a).

Families of students with ASD described feeling powerless regarding the IEP and transitional processes. Families described feeling like they were not equal members of the IEP team, even though federal laws mandated that parents be included in the meeting and viewed as equal team members (IDEA, 2004; Nuske, 2019b). However, parents indicated feeling more equipped to prepare their children for higher education than they would for the workforce (Lee et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2019a).

Lee et al. (2019) expressed that many parents and guardians named a lack of understanding of the workplace skills and tools needed for adults with ASD to succeed in employment. Sosnowy et al. (2018) produced comparable results and specified that overall, most parents described a desire to build their child's independence. Their findings were contrary to the goals of students and adults with ASD, as parents had a more long-term desire to see their children have lifelong safety, security, and increased quality of life. The same parents expressed the desire to equip their children and not enable them, as parents reported wanting to help grow their child's independence without providing unnecessary support that later debilitates them (Sosnowy et al., 2018).

As students transition into higher education, parents expressed the most common concern as the lack of specific services available to their children (Nuske et al., 2019a; Nuske et al., 2019b; Sosnowy et al., 2018). Sosnowy et al. described how frequently many parents expressed concerns because they felt their children did not have the necessary skills to advocate for themselves in college. Universities and colleges were often unwilling to talk to parents of adult children due to privacy laws, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Test et al. (2020) described how even with

legal barriers in place prevented parents from communicating with higher education administration, parents of teens and young adults with ASD still expressed a desire to have more expert professionals involved in the transitional process. The inclusion of experts could help equip all stakeholders with the necessary tools and resources required to develop an efficient and effective transitional plan for teens and adults with ASD.

There is a noted desire for a more collaborative effort and training involving all stakeholders, especially teachers who work with students with ASD towards their transitional planning (Alverson et al., 2019). The Person-Centered Approach in Schools and Transition (PCAST) program, developed by Rutgers University, recalled that when working on a transitional plan, it is imperative to include input from the students and parents (Rutgers, 2021). Rutgers found that during IEP meetings, the special education teacher or the case manager did most of the talking, and the student rarely talked. Sanderson and Goldman (2021) detailed that due to the nature of transitional meetings, the voice heard the most should be that of the student. Rutgers described how increased student participation could happen using worksheets or data sheets completed by the students and their families that include the desires and strengths of the students. Including information such as interest surveys, as described by Paradiz et al. (2018) and White et al. (2021), allowed school staff to understand each student's specific needs and desires.

Teachers and school staff also detailed a lack of awareness of specific aspects of ASD, especially in understanding the individual needs of the disability (Nuske et al., 2019a). Bailey and Baker (2020) and Brownell et al. (2020) detailed how teachers and other school staff reported an absence of formal training and resources to meet the

transitional needs of students with ASD. In addition, school staff expressed a desire for more ASD-specific training to include sufficient time to learn about the disability, needed accommodations, and time to help implement the strategies learned, as expressed by Nuske et al. In IEP and transitional meetings, the power dynamics are often not that of a collaborative nature, as the special education teacher or case manager often guided all decisions with minimal parental and team participation (Rutgers, 2021; Sanderson & Goldman, 2021). Although Solone et al. (2020) described how one person controlling the flow of an IEP meeting could shorten a meeting, it negated the collaborative process mandated under federal law.

IDEA calls for family engagement and support in the decision-making process of an IEP or transitional meeting to be of a collaborative nature (IDEA, 2004; Mueller and Vick, 2019). For effective collaboration, though, Llik and Er (2019) noted that there should be specific training and resources for all IEP team members. However, the training was not often offered to parents. Sanderson and Goldman (2021) described that transitional plans were more effective when the collaborative nature functions effectively, aiding in the transitional process for teens and adults with ASD.

Concerns at the Local Level

According to the latest educational census data in New Jersey, 17.68% of all students aged 6 to 21 were enrolled in the special education program, contrary to the 14% seen nationally (NCES, 2019; NJDOEOSE, 2020). Additionally, 1.78% of school-aged children were diagnosed with ASD compared to 011% nationally in those identified children. Of all the students with autism enrolled in special education, 21.5 spent 80% or

more of their day enrolled in the general education setting than the 64% seen nationally, according to both the NCES and the NJDOE Office of Special Education. The NJ-specific data detailed how recent numbers showed that New Jersey had lower inclusion rates than the rest of the nation (NCES, 2019; NJDOEOSE, 2020). Moody and Laugeson (2020) described how without experience in the general education setting, the ability of students with ASD to generalize their social skills to other locations was often hindered. The decrease in generalization commonly affected their transitional experiences. Buli-Holmberg et al. (2019) detailed how social skills learned from one area and applied to another, such as the workforce and higher education.

According to the NJDOE (2019), special education teachers in New Jersey must have a standard special education certificate and a co-certificate in another subject area, such as math, reading, social studies, or science. The NJDOE further states that a certificate should relate to the content area and grade levels teachers are teaching and can be obtained by completing a teacher preparation course from an accredited college or university. The practicum experience is limited to a single setting to meet state certification requirements for general education and two locations for special education endorsements (NJDOE, 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

In this study, I aimed to understand how teachers struggle to successfully teach social skills to students with ASD in the school environment. This chapter contained information concerning symptoms of ASD and research to provide a background on related concepts and variables. Also included in this chapter were the historical

background of ASD within education, the perceptions of students, staff, and parents regarding their experience regarding their educational experiences related to incorporating social skills instruction within the school setting to help prepare students with ASD for transitional periods within their lives. Other sections detailed information on current PD programs and best practice approaches for working with students with ASD.

Common themes that emerged in the literature review included the effects of social skills education on transitional experiences of adults with ASD. Noted trends also highlighted higher dropout rates in school and lower employment rates for adults with ASD. The literature review also emphasized a lack of effective PD explicitly related to ASD and teachers' practical social skills teaching methods. This literature review revealed that many CST members named a lack of time a significant barrier in the collaborative process of transitional planning.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how K-12 special and general education teachers in several districts in New Jersey experienced challenges implementing instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. Research in Chapter 2 discussed the history of ASD in education and the evolution of inclusionary practices due to increased federal legislation, such as the ADA, Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 504, and IDEA (ADA, 1990; IDEA, 2004). The chapter also detailed the characteristics of ASD explicitly related to social skills and the impacts that a lack of social skills training could have on adults with ASD in the workplace and higher education. Other sections discussed in Chapter 2 included the comorbid nature of ASD, effective social skills teaching methods, effective PD, and the relationship that PD has with the perceived self-efficacy of school staff. The perceptions that both children and adults with ASD and relevant stakeholders had about transitional aspects in life for students with ASD were also discussed. The final sections encompassed staff views on ASD training and teaching social skills to students and concerns at the local level within New Jersey.

This chapter includes a presentation of the research design, rationale, and the role of the researcher. The methodology, instrumentation, and participant recruitment are also examined. I then describe the data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

The central concept of this study was to understand the perceptions of K-12 special and general education teachers in New Jersey as it related to the challenges faced

when implementing instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore participants' perspectives on a specific topic and emphasizes how people interpret and understand their lived experiences (Burkholder et al., 2019; Mohajan, 2018). Burkholder et al. (2019) described a basic qualitative design as one utilized when a study seeks to explore how participants understand their lived experiences and the meaning participants derived and attributed from that experience. Using a basic qualitative design, I aimed to explore and understand how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Ravich & Carl, 2021). Because the purpose of my study aligned with that of a basic qualitative method, I chose to proceed with that design.

Other types of qualitative work considered but not chosen in this study were ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory. An ethnographic study describes a cultural group's behavior (Burkholder et al., 2019). An ethnographic study would have been inappropriate as I was not studying a cultural group. Ravitch and Carl (2021) examined the nature of a phenomenological study as one that describes themes and patterns of individuals over a defined period within a given population. Burkholder et al. explained that the researcher should not attempt to collect data on the study's usefulness or process when conducting a phenomenological study. In addition, Burkholder et al. explicitly stated, "interpolating from participants' experiences their beliefs about usefulness, the process of, or other aspects of the phenomenon is not appropriate … these studies would be more appropriately designed as case studies or basic qualitative studies" (p. 220). Therefore, the phenomenological method was also rejected. A grounded theory

study is a qualitative method that allows a researcher to develop a theory based on extensive documentation of participants' specific experiences and related events (Burkholder et al., 2019). The grounded theory approach was rejected as it did not relate to the purpose of this study. Ultimately, the basic qualitative design approach best met the needs of my study.

Quantitative research includes the testing of hypotheses, the evaluation of data, and a test for significance. Within a quantitative study, only one measurable and quantifiable truth is derived through controlled experimentation (Burkholder et al., 2019). Whereas in this study, I aimed to understand teachers' perspectives and lived experiences, the quantitative approach would have been inappropriate. I sought to understand and examine the participants' experiences relating to working with students with ASD. Thus, the results depended on participants' experiences, making a qualitative approach most suitable.

Interview questions in qualitative research are open-ended, allowing opportunities for inquiry and detail. Therefore, a qualitative design was most appropriate. The open nature of the interview allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the results (Mohajan, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This type of research also permitted me to explore multiple viewpoints and procure new and additional insight. It enabled me to understand social phenomena in context and encourage innovation (Mohajan, 2018).

The qualitative methodology helped to answer the research question for this study: How do K-12 special and general education teachers in New Jersey implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD?

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I collected information from participants as an observer. I conducted the interviews, transcribed the audio recordings, and coded responses. Before initiating the study, research questions were scripted and approved (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The interviews were recorded and transcribed into written format. The written form was then analyzed using open coding and thematic analysis.

Participants for this study were sought from at least three separate school districts within New Jersey, including one where I was previously employed as a math teacher. Therefore, I needed to practice researcher reflexivity. Researcher reflexivity involves the researcher's awareness and addressing of their role within a study, including personal experiences and relationships with participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I had no personal relationship with participants recruited from my previous employer; consequently, there was no influence or pressure to participate in this study. There was potential for participants I had not worked with but who knew me personally to want to help me succeed with this study. To mitigate this concern, I made it clear that the success of this study is not dependent upon individual responses.

Methodology

Participant Selection

When determining a convenience sampling strategy for a qualitative study, the researcher should focus on the relevance of the research questions (Burkholder et al., 2019). Sample size requirements in qualitative research are different from those of quantitative research, as quantitative studies require a sample size that is large enough to

generalize findings to other areas of a population. In contrast, the sample size goal in a qualitative study is to rigorously and ethically answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Thus, a sample size of 10–12 participants for this study was appropriate. Within this study, the population consisted of both special and general education teachers working in New Jersey, with additional requirements as such:

- All participants had at least 2 years of experience working with students with ASD in an educational setting and had obtained a standard certification.
- This study may also have included teachers who are retired or those who are no longer teaching but have taught within the past 5 years in New Jersey.
- All participants had the ability to meet via video conferencing to complete the interview process.
- Participants only included those with whom I had no prior or current experience working nor any personal or professional relationships.

The criteria of each participant were screened on the initial email detailing informed consent terms and the study details. Participants self-selected to confirm if they met the requirements mentioned above. Due to privacy and confidentiality concerns, participants were not required to submit proof of their credentials. This study relied on participant truthfulness and honesty to ensure the trustworthiness of responses.

I sent participants an informed consent form and a summary of the purpose of the study via email using Google Forms, where eligibility was confirmed. The informed consent detailed the voluntary nature of the study and how the study would be conducted. I also described the benefits and confidentiality procedures and included my contact

information. Data collection occurred through the online video conferencing platform zoon (https://zoom.us). All interviews were audio-recorded. The average length of all interviews was 15–30 minutes.

Instrumentation

Interviews were directly related to the interview questions (see Appendix). Forty-two semistructured interview questions were asked and transcribed for coding. The questions included in the Appendix effectively answered the research question.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After receiving participant interest from the flyer posted on social media for 3 weeks, I emailed participants a questionnaire to confirm eligibility and gave them a response deadline of 2 weeks. Email addresses were received when participants responded to the flyer or filled out the interest survey linked in the informed consent document. After receiving responses, I notified participants of their eligibility or exclusion within a week. Participants were recruited from social media platforms via the flyer.

All participants were emailed informed consent and a summary of the study's purpose, understanding that consent could be withdrawn at any time. Once email addresses were obtained, all communication with participants was strictly via email. The purpose of the study was explained to each participant. Informed consent utilized a Google Form, which was made clear to participants that all information was confidential and voluntary. Confidentiality was assured by changing participants' names and affiliated institutions to pseudonyms to protect their identity, as detailed in the informed consent.

Information was safeguarded in a manner not easily accessible by anyone other than me. The responses and information gathered for this study were stored on a password-protected computer that uses password-protected private Wi-Fi. Once the participant agreed to participate and consent was granted, eligibility was determined. When the participant was deemed qualified, I contacted the participant to schedule an interview time.

Interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time. Participants had the option to meet virtually via Zoom, Google Meets, or Microsoft Teams and stated their meeting preference on the eligibility screening form. Participants were reminded that the interview was audio-recorded. My contact information allowed the participant to contact me with questions or concerns. The interview occurred in one session, spanning approximately 15–30 minutes. Confidentiality was required to protect participants from feeling they may receive retaliation from their employer for discussing concerns within their school (Burkholder et al., 2019). Participants were compensated for their time in the form of a $20 Amazon gift card emailed to them upon completion of the interview. There were no participants who responded that did not qualify per the criteria. The following steps in the interview protocol can be seen in more detail in the Appendix:

1. Introductions were made between the researcher and participants.
2. The purpose of the summary and interview procedure was reviewed.
3. Informed consent was reviewed, to include the voluntary nature of the study, confidentiality, and procedures to exit the study.

4. Data collection procedures were reviewed, including audio-recording and transcribing.
5. Participants asked clarifying questions if any.
6. Interviews were conducted using questions in the Appendix.
7. I concluded interviews by informing the participant that the gift card would be sent to their personal email addresses.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis in qualitative research is the process by which a researcher gathers information through the transcription and coding process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Within this study, the research question sought to understand New Jersey teachers' experiences in working with students with ASD and the barriers they faced. The interview questions were created in a manner that answered the research question using the responses from the participants. Key phrases and words were then identified from the responses to ascertain emerging themes that answered the research question.

Interviews were then transcribed and coded using a coding process that uses open, axial, and thematic coding (Burkholder et al., 2019; Saldana, 2021). Interview transcripts from this study were transcribed and coded in the same manner. Ravitch and Carl (2021) described codes as words or short phrases that assign a language-based meaning or visual data cue in qualitative studies and can be single words, sentences, or paragraphs open to interpretation, as coding depends on the lens through which a researcher views their study. Saldana explained open coding, also referred to as initial coding, as helping to section qualitative data down into discrete parts, allowing the researcher to examine and

compare responses. Burkholder et al. described initial coding as the first cycle in the coding process. Initial coding enabled me to reflect on the initial data to generate a starting point of analysis and was completed line by line, with key phrases and terms assigned a number. The process was completed with each transcript for this study, line by line, using Delve software (https://delvetool.com). Key phrases and words were given a numerical code and highlighted under each participant's name.

After completing open coding, I transitioned into axial coding, which further reduced the data into related categories. Axial coding was done by grouping codes of similar themes across several participants. These groups were sorted within the Delve software and could be accessed by searching for a key phrase or code number. Phrases marked as quotes could also be located using this search function. Once axial coding was complete, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify emerging themes (see Saldana, 2021). Axial coding was also performed using Delve and allowed me to gather emerging themes by looking at the groups of phrases or codes gathered to create categories. Doing so allowed me to reduce several semirelated categories into four major themes.

Trustworthiness

Credibility in a qualitative study is like the internal validity of a quantitative study. The credibility of a qualitative study ensures that the data collected matches the research question answered (Burkholder et al., 2019). I verified that my research methods aligned with the research to ensure credibility. The data collection method and coding process will adhere to the standards set forth by Walden University, assuring its integrity.

Establishing credibility can ensure saturation and reflexivity (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Saturation in a qualitative study is the point in the data collection process where no new or relevant information can emerge (Burkholder et al., 2019). For this study, saturation requirements were met depending on participant responses. The recommended minimum number of participants within a qualitative study is six (Burkholder et al., 2019), and my study will include 10–12 participants.

Reflexivity occurs when a researcher continuously documents and discloses potential bias or subjectivity within their study (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, the IRB approved all interview questions before the interviews began. In addition, I took self-reflective field notes on an ongoing basis to check for potential bias, which will also helped confirm my study's dependability (Burkholder et al., 2019). The peer-review process ensured that all data collected were credible, dependable, and free from bias within my study. All field notes and coding data were shared with a fellow doctoral student and the dissertation chairperson to ensure the credibility of this study through the peer-review process.

Practicing reflexivity helped to certify the confirmability of my research. Confirmability within a study removes the researcher's bias and subjectivity from their study (Burkholder et al., 2019). I ensured confirmability by reflecting on my data collection and analysis methods. Whereas internal credibility is established using saturation and reflexivity, establishing transferability is based on accurate descriptions of the setting and participants and helps increase the qualitative study's external validity or

generalizability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The transferability within qualitative research allows others to contextualize the findings and apply them to broader concepts (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, the context of the interviews and how the information was gathered and used were clearly explained. Additionally, participants represented various subject areas and grade levels from schools across the state to ensure the transferability and dependability of my findings.

Ethical Procedures

Approval from the IRB is required before conducting this study. Permission was received in written form (IRB Approval No. 04-19-22-0992872). The approval form included a copy of the informed consent collected from each participant. The informed consent detailed the purpose of the study and the interview process. Information was provided to all participants on what informed consent looked like and informed participants that consent may be withdrawn at any time during the interview process using a Google Form sent to each eligible participant.

According to Burkholder et al. (2019), the informed consent document should clearly state any potential risks that may come to the participants and mitigate these risks. Additionally, information should be included on how the respondents' interviews will be used and how the information will be presented within the study (Babbie, 2020). The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The interviews were only audio recorded. Information will be kept secure for 5 years on a password-protected personal computer that uses password-protected private Wi-Fi.

I ensured that all the above information was included in the informed consent documents in an easy-to-understand language that explicitly states why each participant was chosen. The rationale for selecting participants was their willingness to participate in the study and their ability to meet all the requirements for participation in the study. If participants decided to exit the study early, their information would be omitted from the results, and any data taken from the participant will be immediately and permanently deleted. Participants were informed of their rights to review coding data from their interview if they requested it.

When conducting a study using human participants, the researcher should be aware of potential psychological, mental, emotional, or physical harm (Babbie, 2020). Another way to mitigate this concern was to ensure that school districts and settings would not be named. Instead, only the geographical location and type of school were described.

Summary

Information within this chapter presented the methodology, role of the researcher, and data collection methods and processes. The methodology was discussed in detail, including participant selection, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection methods and analysis. Ways to mitigate potential bias, limitations, and ethical issues were also discussed.

The information derived from this chapter will help me present the results in chapter four. Chapter 4 will include information on the results and the setting, data

collection process, and data analysis. Evidence will also be provided in the following chapter on the trustworthiness of the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of K-12 special and general education teachers in several districts in New Jersey regarding challenges in implementing instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD. The research question that guided the study was "How do K-12 special and general education teachers in New Jersey perceive their ability to implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD?" In this chapter, I provide information on the study's setting and the data collection and analysis processes. The study results are also discussed, along with evidence of trustworthiness. The final section includes a summary of all the major components.

Setting

This study occurred during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which might have affected the interpretation of responses provided by the participants, who may have taught virtually, hybrid, and in-person within the past 5 years. Increased mental health concerns due to the pandemic may also have affected the participants' responses in this study. The interviews also occurred toward the end of the 2021–2022 school year during state testing, which may have affected participants' responses and availability or willingness to participate. Teachers at this time of year often prepare their students for state testing, attend numerous meetings, and close out their classrooms for the school year, potentially causing an increase in stress levels.

Data Collection

Eleven participants took part in this study; each interview took approximately 15–30 minutes and occurred over Zoom. Interviews were audio-recorded only using a digital voice recording device, saved to my personal computer, and later transcribed manually in a Microsoft Word document. All interviews occurred on my personal computer at home, where I ensured privacy. Participants also sat for the interview in a location where they felt their privacy could be assured.

Transcripts were then uploaded to the Delve software program enabling me to analyze, code, and group transcripts where they were manually coded, line by line, on the Delve program during open coding. Delve was also used for axial and thematic analysis. The program allowed me to tag each word or phrase, assign a code and number, and later group common codes and phrases together. No participants were deemed ineligible before, during, or after the interview process, and no participants later withdrew consent for this study.

Participant Demographic

For this study, I assigned the 11 participants pseudonyms using the term "Participant" and a specific letter. Of these 11, eight participants identified as female and three as male. Participants represented elementary, middle, and high school teachers in various subject areas. Two participants taught more than one subject. Additionally, participants included novice teachers, who are teachers with less than 5 years' experience, and teachers who have been teaching for over 10 years. A complete breakdown of the participants' demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Demographic data	Number of participants
Total number of participants	11
Gender	
Female	8
Male	3
Education level	
Bachelor's degree	3
Master's degree	8
Grade level taught	
Elementary school teacher	3
Middle school teacher	4
High school teacher	4
Subject taught	
Math teacher	5
Social studies teacher	1
Science teacher	2
Reading/ELA teacher	2
Elective teacher	1
ESL/ELL teacher	1
All subjects	2
General education teacher	9
Special education teacher	2
Years of teaching experience	
0–4 years	1
5–9 years	5
10–15 years	5
Certification	
Single certification in one content area	3
Multiple certifications in two or more areas	8

Data Analysis

Upon completing each interview, I manually transcribed the interview into a Microsoft Word document. The document was saved into a password-protected folder on my personal computer, which was also password protected. The first step in the coding process was to copy each transcript into the Delve software homepage. Each transcript was entered individually and assigned a name, such as Participant A. I went over each

transcript line by line during the initial coding process to identify and label keywords and phrases, such as “need for more time,” “access to the IEP,” and “administrative support.” I then assigned the codes a numerical value to better group and identify common words or phrases during the subsequent phases of the coding process.

Step 2 involved axial coding by looking at the numerical codes and sorting them into related categories (see Table 2). I used Delve software to analyze codes individually and view the various quotes or words assigned to that code from all participants. Delve also allowed me to search for direct quotations and group them into a central location within the software. I reviewed the related categories to ensure that all codes were correctly grouped. I confirmed that I could identify the participants’ pseudonyms whose responses were connected to each code or quote. The codes in Table 2 were generated from participant responses such as that of Participant A, who recalled that “I just feel like the training provided to me was only cursory; I don’t think that everyone who attended those trainings were able to gain enough depth of understanding of autism.” Additionally, when asked about the level of support received from their administration in implementing social skills within the classroom, Participant D noted that it was “not effective.” When asked to explain, they laughed and further stated, “it does not exist, so not effective.”

During Step 3, I grouped and named the emerging trends and related categories such as needing more time, more training, administrative support, teacher training courses, and professional development needs. The software allowed me to identify the emerging trends as I labeled and sorted the related categories created in Step 2 into emerging themes. I noted various quotes, codes, and phrases with more than one meaning

related to efficacy and responses to interview questions using a 4-point scaled system. I cross-referenced various codes across several themes by searching for a keyword or phrase within the program.

Table 2

Codes Utilized

Codes/phrases utilized	Number of participants
Autism is a large spectrum of needs	8
Need to do own research Need to seek support outside of school/work	5
Need more time to plan More time to understand ASD More time to collaborate	9
Pressure from administration Focus on academics State-tested content areas have more priority	8
Not effective or slightly effective administrative support	9
Not effective or slightly effective in-service PD	10
Not effective or slightly effective teacher preparation courses	10
A lack of effective collaboration with the CST	7
Not a part of the decision-making process within the CST	6
Lack of access to full IEP View areas related to goals/objectives only Access to snapshots only	3
A lack of time to collaborate with CST Uncommon planning Coverages and meetings during planning	9

Common thoughts and barriers named by participants were ineffective leadership or administration, feeling pressure from their administration to focus on academics, insufficient college/university courses, a lack of effective PD, a lack of understanding of what students with ASD need, understanding ASD, a scarcity of time and resources, ineffective collaboration, and not feeling a part of the decision-making process within

the. CST. During the final stage of the coding process, these ideas were grouped to show four major themes. Respondents indicated a lack of understanding of the spectrum of needs of students with ASD and the transitional social skills development needed. Participants also named a lack of administrative support and resources for implementing social skills instruction in the classroom. A lack of effective training in the university setting and during in-service PD was another theme, in addition to ineffective collaboration practices within the CST.

Results

Each interview response was coded and analyzed during thematic analysis to answer the research question. The themes suggested that participants faced several barriers to implementing transitional social skills within the classroom. Participants voiced concerns regarding their ability to understand the needs of students with ASD as it related to social skills instruction. The respondents indicated that they felt as though they did not receive adequate training to work with students with ASD during their teacher preparation courses, and again during in-service PD.

I then grouped the identified codes into emerging major themes. The first theme that developed was a decreased understanding of ASD pertaining to the social skills needs of students. Teachers voiced a desire for a deeper understanding of the nature of ASD and the support and resources that were needed to help meet those needs. This lack of understanding was often attributed to insufficient training at school and during schoolwide PD which arose as the second theme. Teachers recalled having training on students with disabilities in their preservice courses, as well as during schoolwide PD, but

seldom did it relate to ASD explicitly. Participants called for additional training and resources to help them understand the nature of ASD as well as best practice techniques when working with students.

Participants recalled feeling that additional support and resources entailed a need for an increase in administrative support. The third theme that emerged was a noted lack of administrative support and resources in implementing social skills within the classroom. Participants stated that they often felt pressure from their administration to focus on academics, and rarely did they receive support relating to implementing social skills within the academic setting. Frequently, respondents indicated that social skills instruction was the responsibility of other members of the CST, and they were unsure of their ability to effectively cooperate with the CST. Ineffective collaboration with other members of the CST, as well as a perceived inability to implement the IEP as written was the fourth theme that surfaced.

Theme 1: Lack of Understanding of ASD and the Social Skills Needs of Students With ASD in the Academic Setting

Of the 11 participants, 73% reported a lack of understanding of what ASD was due to the extensive spectrum of needs that came with the diagnosis. Participant K noted, “when I think of teachers who have students with autism in their class, they know where to begin with the students and where to go from there. I think I don’t really have that knowledge, so, unfortunately.” When asked what they feel the most significant barrier is when implementing transitional social skills within the classroom, Participant H recalled,

> Really knowing what those skills are and how I can help in my classroom, or even in like an after-school club or something. Really, my roles are almost black and white right now because of the academic focus, and most students fall in a grey area. I don’t really know how to help in that case.

Participant G had similar concerns regarding working with the varying needs that arose with students with ASD: “really understanding what they are and what autism is. I mean, I know the spectrum is so large, but really just even a basic understanding of what they would need, I feel like would help me so much.”

Two respondents who did not report a lack of understanding of autism were special education teachers. The third was a general education teacher who obtained special education certifications and had previous training in special education. The responses of the three participants reinforced the literature noting a difference in the perceived self-efficacy of special and general education teachers when working with students with ASD (Fowler et al., 2019). Only 36% of participants agreed with the statement (Interview Question 16), “I feel adequately prepared to teach the transitional and social skills needed to students with ASD to ensure success in their postsecondary school endeavors.” The participants who agreed described the training and resources they sought as excluding professional development and teacher preparation courses. The most common responses for those who disagreed detailed the need for more training specific to ASD. Overall, the results of this study showed a need for more effective training both during teacher preparation courses and during schoolwide PD.

Theme 2: Preservice and In-Service Training Insufficient in Preparing Teachers to Work With Students With ASD

When examining the participants' perceived self-efficacy related to in-service and preservice training courses, participants were asked two specific questions. Question 10 asked, "How do you rate your teacher training regarding effectively preparing you with the skills needed to teach transitional skills to students with ASD from your teacher education program?" and Question 12 probed, "How do you rate your teacher PD training as effectively preparing you with the skills needed to teach transitional skills to students with ASD?" Both questions were rated on a four-point scale: *not effective*, *slightly effective*, *effective*, and *highly effective*. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Efficacy Result

Interview question	Not effective	Slightly effective	Effective	Highly effective
8	1	3	6	1
10	7	3	1	0
12	3	7	1	0
14	1	8	2	0

Sixty-four percent of respondents rated the training received before teaching as not effective, and 27% rated it as slightly effective; only 9% believed that the training was effective. Participant E noted, "I didn't have a single course in college that even touched on autism," and described a feeling of a desire for more explicit training. Some respondents recalled some training in the field of disabilities but not any that taught practices specifically concerning autism. Participant G remembered, "I mean it touched on like all students with disabilities, but nothing specific talked about autism. I really

don't ever remember learning about it unless it was mentioned as one of the categories with IEPs."

Other participants recollected receiving ASD-specific training but felt it did not go as in-depth as possible. Participant K stated, "we have had some training on autism and what it's like to have a child with autism having some things that you can use in the classroom, but more training is always preferred." Respondents also noted a more generalized training encompassing varying needs and disabilities. One experience was illustrated by Participant B, who reported, "they [training courses] talked about it little they just went a little in-depth with all the classifications, then they went in-depth with UDL universal design for learning style, but nothing specific to autism."

Twenty-seven percent of the participants felt that their PD was ineffective in equipping them with the skills to work with students with ASD, and 64% indicated it as slightly effective; only 9% felt it was effective. No respondents indicated that they thought it was highly effective. These responses indicated that 91% of the participants believed in-service training was insufficient to prepare them to work with students with ASD.

When reporting on their experiences with in-service PD, Participant B named a lack of understanding of the transitional skills needed due to inadequate training and stated that:

> There is not a training I can remember that dealt with autism and transitional skills isn't really something that they talk about at all. The only time I really hear about it is at an IEP meeting if the student is turning 14.

This same notion was also described by Participant F, who described that

> there was nothing though, that was specific to just working on transitional skills ... I really think, though, that is because transitional planning does not start until middle school, so it really is not addressed in elementary school at all.

Some participants did note some transitional planning training, but not training that discussed ASD specifically, as pointed out by Participant E: "I did have PD that taught exclusively on how to transition high school students to college, but while I was not explicit about students with autism, at least it touched on it, but it still was not effective." These responses indicated the varying experiences that some teachers might have on transitional skills; however, most participants revealed that training did not support the need to understand the skills required by students with ASD. Participant G expressed frustration at the lack of preparation and training for general education teachers: "it is just that it seems that only members of the special education team get this training, and it's not something that we are told to worry about as a general education teacher."

Regarding whether the special education teacher or other members of the CST are responsible for providing content to students with disabilities, 45.4% of participants indicated that there tended to be a divide in the classroom, even in an inclusion setting. Therefore, much of the social skills development was placed on the responsibility of the special education teacher or CST member. These results conveyed a need for more specialized training in transitional goals and services for students with autism, which also called for more administrative support with increased available resources, as school

administrators are generally responsible for allocating resources and organizing school-wide PD.

Theme 3: Desire for Increased Administrative Support and Resources for Implementing Social Skills in the Academic Setting

When asked, “How would you rate your support from administration in implementing social skills within the classroom?” only 18% of participants signified that the support is effective, and 73% reported it as only slightly effective. Participants recalled varying experiences with their administration regarding the level of support and resources in place. Participant A recollected,

> I have had different experiences; one is that people who are very open, what do we need to do we will figure it out. We have powerful conversations, come up with solutions, and ability to support solutions, and I have also had experiences where their understanding is limited, so it is very restrictive.

Participant H recounted similar experiences:

> I would say slightly effective again if I am averaging it all. I mean, this year, it is a lot better because we are focusing a lot more on SEL, and as the co-teacher, it is one of my priorities.

Other participants, such as Participant E, had different viewpoints and acknowledged: “generally we had some support with building social skills explicitly.” Similar experiences were noted by Participant K, who specified, “I think a lot of times if I have any struggles with a student, they are always supportive in helping me with finding ways to help a student a build a culture in a classroom.” These responses showed varying levels

of support felt by the participants when it came to implementing social skills within the classroom. The responses indicated by participants acknowledged that school closures due to Covid-19 emphasized social skills and socialization, which was not something they felt occurred in previous years.

Of note, of the eight respondents who rated their administrative support as being “slightly effective,” four indicated that in-service PD is slightly effective, and the other four rated it as ineffective. These results suggested a potential correlation between the type of PD offered to staff and their feelings of support from their administration. Additional studies could seek to understand this possible correlation as means to understand the type of administrative support that is most effective in increasing teacher efficacy when working with students with ASD.

Participants were then asked, “How do you rate the availability of resources within your school to implement transitional aspects of a student’s IEP?” Fifty-five percent of participants reported that resources were available on a “somewhat” basis, 36% identified that resources were available “as needed,” and 9% stated that there were “none available.” No participants selected “available all the time” or “more than available” options.

Participant J illustrated that when it came to resources and needs, they felt that there were none available and revealed: “I want to say none, but I will say somewhat. I feel like there is just no more money.” Participant H credited an increase in the availability of resources to Covid-19 funds: “I feel like Covid put more of an emphasis on social skills, and so I have seen a lot more programs in the past 2 years.” Several

participants explicitly named a need for more resources related to ASD-specific training. Participant E stated,

> I think just like a lot of schools are building a toolbox on how to help students with LD [learning disabilities] that are general, we need a toolbox for certain students with autism specifically. That can say 'here are some strategies that work well, here are some activities to do when this happens, here are some questions to ask when a student has a meltdown, and things like that.' In my school, we were given strategies when a student was labeled are LD, but we weren't given that with autism.

The same sentiment was echoed by other participants who called for more specific resources about ASD and working on social skills with students with ASD. This concern was further exasperated by their administration's pressure to focus on academic content.

When asked, "Do you feel that you have adequate time to incorporate social skills instruction during your academic?" 55% of respondents answered with a "no," 18% responded with "yes," and 27% recalled "sometimes." Participant C specified, "No, I don't know if it is me or the structure; I don't think I have time; I have to teach them academics primarily," which displayed the pressure felt by the participant to focus on their academic content during class time. Participant B described varying experiences depending on their role throughout their career:

> I would say not. The focus is on academics, even the academic goals, especially in the mainstream setting. When I worked in a self-contained setting, I definitely

> had a lot more time because they were on a different course of study, but not when they are doing the same state testing.

Other participants recalled similar experiences, such as Participant A, who stated, “Not always, because sometimes the pressure is on the content getting taught and so slowing down during instruction is not always possible.”

Overall, participant responses revealed a feeling of pressure or burden to reach academic standards and content as a priority over social skills instruction. Participant I responded, “No, my role is usually just the academic portion. The co-teachers and support staff focus on other behavioral and social goals.” which suggested a division in roles when it comes to servicing students with IEPs in an inclusion setting. This type of division of roles not only goes against best practice inclusionary procedures (Moefield, 2019) but also hurt the collaborative nature of the IEP and CST process.

Theme 4: Ineffective Collaboration With the CST and Limited Teacher Access to the IEP in its Entirety

When asked, “How do you rate your ability to effectively collaborate with all stakeholders when it comes to teaching transitional skills to students with ASD?” 9% of participants rated themselves as being “not effective,” 27% selected “slightly effective,” 55% believed they were “effective,” and 9% said that they were “highly effective.” Participant G recalled, “I am not sure what specific transitional skills are needed, to be honest. Usually that’s on the special education teacher or the child study team,” which again signified a divide in the roles and responsibilities of all members of the CST as well as the joint ownership of co-taught classes.

Participants where then asked about their confidence regarding collaboration with the CST. Forty-five percent of participants believed that they felt “confident” enough to do so (see Table 4). The remaining 55% felt “somewhat confident.” Responses indicated a lack of formalized training, and others related their concerns to access to the IEP as the rationale for their choice. Participant E stated, “I would say somewhat content-wise, although I don’t have traditional training, I have taught pretty long and I’ve seen a lot of different students, and so I still think that I can speak on what students can do.” Many teachers felt that other skills, especially social skills, are more on the responsibility of the special education staff. The divide was even further widened in cases where the general education teachers were not given access to the entire IEP. As Participant G recalled, “I don’t really ever see the full IEP unless I am at the meeting, I only see the areas that specifically pertain to reading or math, so I am not too sure.” Only Participant D stated that they felt “very confident” as they made sure to read and follow the entire IEP. These responses revealed that joint ownership over meeting the transitional and social skills goals within the IEP was not always present, creating a significant barrier to effective collaboration and inclusion.

Table 4

Interview Questions 24 and 27

Participant	Ability to be effective member of IEP team (24)	How confident do you feel in your ability to meet transitional IEP goals? (27)
A	Confident	Confident
B	Somewhat confident	Somewhat confident
C	Confident	Somewhat confident
D	Somewhat confident	Very Confident
E	Somewhat confident	Somewhat confident
F	Confident	Confident
G	Somewhat confident	Confident
H	Confident	Somewhat confident
I	Somewhat confident	Somewhat confident
J	Confident	Confident
K	Somewhat confident	Somewhat confident

Table 5 presents additional relevant quotes from the responses to Question 27. Responses signified a trend of a lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of general education teachers or a lack of training on how to collaborate as a CST effectively.

Table 5

Responses to Interview Question 27

Participant	Responses to Question 27
C	"Well, I think because we are talking about the social skills, I think I don't always know how to work with them on the social stuff."
E	"Maybe somewhat confident while I don't have traditional research and understanding, I have done it a little bit."
K	"I would say somewhat confident to confident. Usually, the SPED teacher in the classroom kind of focuses on those goals and lets me know what those goals are. So, while I do interact with the student, the SPED teacher interacts with them more. Depending on their mathematic level, like pull them. If they don't need to be pulled as much, then I am more confident than I would be if they pulled them more."

One of the most significant themes that emerged during the data analysis process was a lack of available time for collaboration and social skills implementation within the academic setting. When asked about the availability of time to effectively collaborate with members of the IEP team (question 30), 27% of participants responded they felt they had enough time to do so. In comparison, 64% reported that they did not. Only one participant said that they sometimes had enough time, depending on the day, and specified: “Sometimes, it depends on planning and coverages right now I am covering a lot during my prep periods, so unless it is built into a teacher workday, I don’t really get to collaborate with my colleagues across content areas.”

Another key theme that arose with question 30 was the scarcity of common planning times. Participant G stated: “we would need common planning time, and I don’t really have that with other teachers on the grade team. Usually, my planning aligns with other reading teachers in different grades.” The same sentiment was revealed by Participant H, who reported: “Not really no. Common planning is very hard in secondary ed. We almost just collaborate via email or after school sometimes.” Participant K noted that the availability of common planning was adequate for the 2021-22 school year, but that was not always the case. They revealed:

> This year yes, because, like I said, we all (teachers in the same grade) have the same prep time. In past years a lot of the times, the SPED teacher would also be teaching other classes other subjects, so then you sometimes would get one prep with them, so sometimes, but depending on what their caseload is like you may not have as much time as you would like.

These responses highlighted a need for more time to collaborate with members of the CST during the school day to help increase teachers' confidence levels in working with students with ASD. The increase could potentially improve teachers' efficacy as it related to social skills instruction within the academic setting.

Question 32 asked participants if they felt they had enough time during the day to incorporate social skills instruction into their academics. Eighteen percent of participants responded with "yes," 55% stated "no," and 27% replied "sometimes." The responses could be attributed to the information presented in the prior sections regarding a push from their administration to focus on academics, especially for subjects tested on state exams at the end of the school year. Participant B claimed:

> I would say definitely not; the focus is on academics, even the academic goals, especially in the mainstream setting. When I worked in a self-contained setting, I definitely had a lot more time because they were on a different course of study, but not when they are doing the same state testing.

Other participants echoed similar responses but showed that they felt a clear divide between academics and social skills within the classroom. This divide extended into the areas of roles and responsibilities between the general education teachers, special education teachers, and other members of the CST. Regarding the collaborative nature of an IEP meeting, Participant B conveyed: "the general education teacher doesn't do a whole lot of talking because a lot of time there is a clear division where the kids with IEPs are mine, so I probably do a little bit more."

Participant G responded with: "For me, definitely not. I am more responsible for academics." Participant H revealed similar ideas with their response: "It depends: if it is something that can be done quickly, then yes. Usually, homeroom focuses more on those skills. It is also mostly done in self-contained or resource settings." This consistent idea was present in the response of Participant I, who asserted: "The co-teachers and support staff focus on other behavioral and social goals." These answers highlighted the division that existed even in a co-taught classroom. The division affected teachers' perceived self-efficacy to be influential members of the CST.

The collaborative nature of a CST was also impacted when not all team members felt like they were part of the decision-making process. When asked: "Do you feel as though you are a part of the decision-making process within your school when it comes to implementing social and academic programs for students with IEPs?" (Question 40), only 9% of participants "yes." Eighty-two percent responded "no," and 9% responded "sometimes." Several participants stated that they had some input regarding the types of accommodations and modifications within the IEP, but not the programming decisions for their students. Participant K responded: "not for programming, not at all," and Participant I reported: "Sometimes, if it's about their academics, then yes, but programming is more of a leadership issue." Additional participants conveyed similar feelings leading to a trend and theme that showed that the teachers involved in this study did not feel they were a part of the whole decision-making process within the CST. This lack of effective collaboration harmed the team-oriented approach that entails a successful CST, which could negatively impact the students' services.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

During this study, I took adequate measures to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of my research. All steps taken were aligned with that in Chapter 3, with minimal deviations. There were no unforeseen events that affected the trustworthiness of my results.

Credibility

When certifying credibility within qualitative research, the researcher should ensure that the research question and methods are aligned (Burkholder et al., 2019). The interview questions were approved by the Walden University IRB and written in a manner that allowed me to explore the research question. The data collection procedure was aligned with the steps detailed in Chapter 3. The only deviation was that administrative consent was not needed, and the implementation of an interest survey was sent after potential participants viewed the approved informed consent. The inclusion of 11 participants further ensured credibility within this study.

Transferability

Within a qualitative study, the transferability allows for others to be able to contextualize the findings to wider ideas. Participants represented teachers from elementary, middle, and high school, with representation from all core content areas and elective courses, securing the transferability of my study. After I conducted the 11th interview, no new themes or patterns began to emerge, indicating saturation had been met. This representation, along with the accurate and detailed description of the study's setting, helped to ensure the transferability of these findings.

Dependability

When safeguarding the dependability of qualitative research, the researcher should reflect often on their practice to remove potential bias by ensuring reliable results (Burkholder et al., 2019). To secure the dependability of. I took frequent field notes during the interview and coding process. I often reflected on my field notes during the coding process to credit an accurate depiction of what participants stated during their interviews.

Confirmability

In practicing confirmability within a qualitative study, a researcher removes possible bias and subjectivity from their results (Burkholder et al., 2019). The findings of this study, data analysis steps, and procedures were shared with my dissertation committee, absent all possible identifying information. The implementation of the methods used in this study was shared with a fellow doctoral student and my dissertation committee. It was vital to certify that all potential bias was removed from this study when ensuring confirmability. When safeguarding confirmability, all steps taken were aligned with those in Chapter 3.

Summary

Within this study, the research question sought to understand the perceptions of K-12 teachers in NJ of their ability to implement transitional social skills instruction within their classrooms. Through the interview and coding process, responses from the participants within this study indicated significant barriers in place that affected the efficacy of the respondents to implement said skills. Named barriers included

understanding ASD and what the disability entails, insufficient training, varying levels of support from administration, and ineffective collaboration within the CST.

In Chapter 5, the key findings will be summarized and interpreted. Comparisons with the conclusions of this study against the literature review section will also be discussed, as well as how the results related to the UDT conceptual framework. Additionally, limitations of this study as it pertained to any changes from Chapter 1 will be discussed, as will recommendations for future research. The final sections will include the implications for positive social change and practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study was conducted to understand the perceptions that teachers in NJ had regarding their ability to implement transitional social skills within the classroom for students with ASD. This study was vital as it helped identify a gap in practice when working with students with ASD. In this chapter, I include an interpretation of the findings, recommendations for further study or research, the implications of this research, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The major themes that emerged during this study were a lack of understanding of ASD, insufficient teacher training, inconsistent administrative support, and ineffective collaboration with the CST. This section will include an in-depth interpretation of these results broken down into sections and an interpretation of how the UDT conceptual framework aligns with the findings.

Understanding of ASD

The general feeling regarding autism from participants was the need for more formalized training to understand the nature of autism. These findings were consistent with Roberts and Webster (2020), who established a need for more intensive and specific ASD training. As Love et al. (2019) noted, additional training could directly impact the perceived self-efficacy of working with students with ASD. Participants' beliefs that they lacked a proper understanding of ASD corroborated the findings of Rajotte et al. (2022), who described this concern in their study. Participants also confirmed the results of

Rajotte et al., Roberts and Webster, and Love et al. and relayed similar feelings regarding their understanding of the needs of students with ASD and the disorder.

Seventy-three percent of the participants reported a lack of understanding of ASD and the challenges that came with it. Furthermore, only 36% of participants felt they were adequately prepared to teach students with ASD the transitional social skills they needed to be successful after they left the school setting. These findings aligned with those of Rajotte et al. (2022) who presented information that teachers indicated a lack of understanding of the large spectrum of needs that came when working with students with ASD. My findings are also aligned with those of Nuske et al. (2019a), who concluded that this lack of understanding of ASD also caused a decrease in teachers' perceived self-efficacy to meet the individual needs and supports required when working with students with ASD. Moreover, as Nuske et al. (2019b) explained, with this loss in understanding came a need for more time to attend additional training and learn more about the needs of students with ASD. My findings aligned with those of Nuske et al. (2019b).

The research conducted by Kalinowski et al. (2019) supported that of Nuske et al. (2019a) concerning the need for individualized support and found that this support required the implementation of training specific to ASD for teachers. This concept was also relayed in my results as participants revealed concerns regarding the lack of training they received regarding working with students with ASD. Grob et al. (2019) detailed how this training was essential as social skills instruction should begin as early as possible for students with ASD. As noted in my research, the understanding of the support needed for students with ASD required a deeper understanding of what ASD is, evident in both my

results and the results of researchers such as Nuske et al., Grob et al., and Love et al. (2019). Love et al. described how this increase in understanding came with a more formalized training process for teachers. Participants within my study recalled ineffective training and named a desire for more effective training to work with students with ASD.

Teacher Training

Sixty-four percent of participants believed that their preparation courses were “not effective,” and only 9% thought that it was “effective” enough to prepare them to work with students with ASD. For current teachers, only 9% of participants thought current PD was “effective” in helping them work with students with ASD in their classroom. These findings were like that of Rajotte et al. (2022) who concluded a direct positive correlation between the self-perceived efficacy of teachers in working with students with ASD. In the 2019 report conducted by the CEC, only 8% of general education teachers reported feeling prepared to work with students with ASD, which also supported my findings. Exploration of this topic conducted by D’Agostino and Douglas (2020) presented information on how current training courses did not effectively prepare teachers with the skills needed to practice efficient inclusionary skills within their classrooms for students with ASD. A similar sentiment was echoed by many participants within my study who relayed concerns that much of their training only focused on how to help students academically and not socially. My outcomes aligned with those of Grob et al. (2019) and Pallathra et al. (2018), who reported comparable results and indicated that additional training could help teachers feel more confident in their abilities to meet the social needs of their students with ASD.

Scott and Bruno (2018) presented data on how instructional training practices should focus more on UDL-style approaches that allow teachers to meet the needs of students with ASD in various aspects of their day. The UDL style of learning and teaching was also noted by Kurniansari et al. (2021), who reported that the effective implementation of UDL style teaching and learning strategies would greatly benefit teaching to the whole child. Carrington et al. (2020) reported similar findings. Participants not only reported a lack of confidence in their preservice and in-service training courses, but they also described that they felt unprepared to teach needed skills to students with ASD due to insufficient training that they have received.

The participants provided various reasons why they believed their training to be ineffective. Many participants felt the training was specific to members of the CST who had a special education or related service role. Alnasser (2021) discussed how general education teachers were unsure of how to work with the CST to meet the needs of students with disabilities and that there was often a divide between general education teachers and special education teachers in an inclusion setting. My results indicated similar concerns about the divide in responsibilities for students with ASD within the classroom as reported by Alnasser, as participants reported a desire to receive the same training that other members of the CST received.

Moefield (2019) argued that the responsibility for special education students' education and development falls on the general education and special education teacher. However, as Alnasser (2021) reported that not all teachers felt effective and confident enough to fulfill this responsibility. Participants voiced concerns about understanding the

roles and responsibilities of the special education teachers in their classes versus what they felt they were responsible for, especially regarding social skills instruction during academic lessons.

Varying experiences in teacher efficacy could be explained by the inconsistencies in teacher training programs, as was also noted by Hsiao and Sorenson (2019) and Bertuccio et al. (2019). These inconsistencies could be viewed in participants’ responses concerning preservice and in-service teacher training courses. Additionally, many participants discussed that they needed to seek PD from an outside source, as they felt the training they received from PD within their buildings was insufficient. Responses aligned with the findings of Harrison et al. (2019), who found a noted lack of ASD-specific training for teachers working with students with ASD. In-service PD relating to social skills was discussed by researchers Stevenson and Correa (2019), who supported the findings of Harrison et al. and concluded that effective PD for teachers should be conducted in a manner that allowed teachers to implement the techniques taught in various academic settings. However, participants felt that PD offered did not give them the chance to implement new skills. Understanding the needs of teachers working with students with ASD could also be done by looking at the level of administrative support.

Administrative Support

Participants overwhelmingly showed concern about the support provided to them by their administration regarding implementing social skills within the classroom. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that their current administration was only “slightly effective” in helping them do so, and 9% stated that they felt their

administration was “not effective.” Additionally, only 55% of respondents believed that the needed resources for doing so were “somewhat available,” and 9% stated that there were “none available.” The results indicated that 55% of participants felt that they are not provided with enough time to effectively meet the needs of students with ASD within their classroom, which represented significant barriers to effective instructional strategies for students with ASD. These outcomes also reinforced many of the same obstacles to effective instruction for students with ASD as identified by researchers such as Fowler et al. (2019), who reported that only 29% of respondents in their study described feeling as though their principal had enough resources and training to support them, and 55% of the participants recounted the same of their special education supervisors.

Support from building administrators was an essential component of success for any program within a school, as concluded by Webster and Litchka (2020) and Buli-Holmberg et al. (2019). Both studies highlighted the need for a positive climate within the school setting that allowed staff members to feel valued and included in the decision-making process. However, the participants in my study often felt they were not a part of this process when making decisions about or implementing needed programs for their students with ASD. Leithwood et al. (2020) described a democratic leadership style as the most effective when creating a thriving school environment, allowing teachers to feel valued and empowered. Many participants within my study, however, did not identify this notion and reported a lack of feeling included in the decision-making process during the interview.

Furthermore, my research findings were consistent with Fowler et al.'s (2019) findings about faith in leadership. Their study found a significant lack of trust in school leadership regarding the needed support and resources for students with disabilities. The same theme was evident in my results, which also aligned with the findings from Adalarasu et al. (2020), who described a similar shortage of support, such as insufficient resources and training. An additional concern identified by participants was pressure from their administration to focus on academic content over social skills support. Adalarasu et al. also identified this concept in their results. When social skills support and resources are not in place, it could significantly impact an IEP team's collaborative nature. These findings are consistent with my results and those of Moefield (2019).

Collaboration With the CST

My research indicated that 55% of participants felt they effectively collaborated with the CST. Several general education participants stated that they did not provide the same amount of input during IEP meetings as other members of the CST did. There were also documented references to a clear divide between the roles of a general education teacher and a special education teacher in the inclusion setting. Another significant theme that emerged from participant responses was a shortage of time to collaborate with members of the CST and implement social skills instruction in the classroom setting.

Results highlighted a theme of ineffective collaboration within the CST and were comparable to the results of Alnasser (2021) and Ansari et al. (2021), who reported that additional support and training were needed for teaching staff regarding collaboration within the CST. Both Fowler et al. (2019) and Adalarasu et al. (2020) found that there

was a need for more time for the CST to collaborate and train together, and my results aligned with their findings. Teachers reflected on the idea that they needed to understand ASD more to become more influential members of the CST. Vincent (2019) concluded similar results and indicated that ASD-specific training, especially that which focused on collaborating with multiple agencies, would increase the efficacy of teachers working with students with ASD.

Adalarasu et al. (2020) concluded that most current trainings emphasized academic skills, and seldom incorporated essential social skills components. My findings aligned with those of Adalarasu et al. as they related to the pressure felt by participants to prioritize academics over social skills instruction. Moefield (2019) attributed academic prioritization to a lack of access to the IEP in its entirety preventing teachers from recognizing the needs of the whole child, and my results concluded similar outcomes. Sterret et al. (2018) concluded similar concerns in their study. Much of the barriers named within my study could also be addressed via MTSS-type approaches and staff training, as Rutgers (2021) found, which also tied into the UDT conceptual framework.

The UDT Framework

The UDT model is based on the transitional needs of students with disabilities and blended UDL style methodologies to help meet these needs and remove current barriers (Scheirer, 2020; Scott & Bruno, 2018). Findings from my study indicated that 64% of participants felt they were not equipped to meet the transitional social skills needs of students with ASD. Scott and Bruno identified a similar concern regarding working with students with disabilities and concluded that the UDT framework may be used as a model

to blend best practices approaches within academics and social skills outcomes to help meet the needs of those students (Scott & Bruno, 2018). My results supported the idea that to successfully prepare students with ASD for postsecondary school endeavors, there needed to be a blending of academic and social skills support. However, participants indicated a clear divide concerning who was responsible for the academic needs and who would meet the social needs of students with ASD.

Participants revealed a lack of formalized training for working with students with ASD. Most prominent was training centered around incorporating social skills within the academic setting and meeting students' transitional social skills needs. The UDT framework identified comparable needs and helped provide a framework for staff to blend transitional needs with the UDL approach to prepare students for life after their school years. The UDT framework explicitly discussed the need for support in self-determination, various life domains, and the use of multiple resources/perspectives (Scott & Bruno, 2018; Thoma et al., 2019). Participants reported a need for more support, resources, and training in working with students with ASD.

Limitations of the Study

My study's limitations were similar and aligned with those mentioned in Chapter 1. Limitations included the dependability of the findings, potential bias within the results, the truthfulness of the participants, and an ongoing pandemic. Each of these limitations was addressed effectively to limit the effect it could have on the study results.

My research was contingent on the honest and truthful responses of the participants in a manner that allowed them to express concerns and opinions regarding

the research question openly. Implementing confidentiality and pseudonyms helped ensure my findings' dependability by minimizing the potentially harmful effects participants may have felt by participating in this study. Furthermore, the use of open and axial coding in a manner approved by Walden University helped increase the dependability of my results and reduce potential bias.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews were transcribed from audio recordings. The absence of face-to-face interviews could have affected the nature of the interviews as there may not have been as much of a personal connection between me and the participants. This may be seen as a limitation by impacting rapport and responses.

Recommendations

The findings of my study indicated a need for research on ways to increase training opportunities for teachers that also included adequate administrative support and resources. Pellicano et al. (2018) described the "inclusion illusion" and how when students with ASD were placed into an inclusion setting and staff were not effectively trained in inclusionary practices, then students were more likely to experience negative interactions due to limited social skills during their school years (Frye, 2018; Stevenson & Correa, 2019). My findings supported similar ideas and call for a need for more research on how to increase training for staff regarding working with students with ASD.

Studies by Elias and White (2019) and Harrison et al. (2019) presented data on how teachers lacked effective skills and training to incorporate social skills within the school setting. Elliot et al. (2021) described an implementation of SEL-type techniques to

help meet this need, but as my study indicated, many teachers were unaware of how to do so. Further research in this area may help bridge the noted gap identified in my research. Additional research is essential; as Stephenson et al. (2021) pointed out, a lack of formalized training directly affected teachers' efficacy in implementing learned skills. Again, this idea is a belief echoed by participants, and therefore it is a recommendation that additional training specific to social skills instruction be implemented throughout the year for all school staff.

Further research should also look to find effective ways to offer refresher training on an ongoing and cyclical basis regarding working with students with ASD. As participants often reported a single training on the topic, and many participants did not rate that training as effective. Kalinowski et al. (2019) presented data that found a need for ongoing training offered several times throughout the year. As Grob et al. (2019) reported, this training could help students with ASD generalize the skills learned to other areas in life. Additional research could help increase teacher confidence in working with students with ASD.

Additional recommendations include administrative and leadership support. Many participants did not feel they received the necessary support and resources from their administration regarding implementing social skills within the classroom. Webster and Litchka (2020) described a similar concept in their study and concluded that effective leadership provided for the needs of others and could inspire teachers and help build their confidence. Research on effective leadership strategies, including ways to help provide

teachers with the needed resources and time to collaborate with the CST and implement social skills within the classroom, could help bridge the gap identified in my study.

Implications

My study's results could help identify a gap in research and practice regarding working with students with ASD and may benefit society on an individual, family, organizational, and societal level. On an individual level, my research may allow teachers of students with ASD to understand that other teachers in the same profession face similar barriers as themselves in the classroom. Seeing other teachers with similar experiences could lessen feelings of isolation and increase confidence to advocate for changes needed to work with students with ASD. Additionally, administrators may see the longer-ranging concerns regarding working with students with ASD, specifically regarding administrative support and resources. Administrators could potentially be motivated to provide teachers with resources needed and identified, such as more planning time, less pressure to focus on academics, and additional resources within their classrooms.

Families of students with ASD may be able to see how broad and widespread the issues affecting teachers were and use this to advocate for more training and resources for their children's teachers. Seeing the problem on a larger scale could help increase parental participation in the CST and strengthen their role as advocates, which were areas of concern identified in Chapter 2.

Other potential implications of my study on an organizational level may be to identify a need for more formalized training for teachers in the state of NJ due to the lack

of practicum requirements for both special and general education teachers. According to the NJDOE (2019), there are only two practicum requirements for special education teachers and one for general education teachers to obtain certifications. Results indicated many participants felt unprepared to work with students with ASD in their classroom setting due to a lack of training and experience on the topic.

It is recommended that teachers who read my research identify growth areas for themselves as it relates to what training they need to work with students with ASD. Teachers should then seek training from their administration and advocate for their professional growth to make the training available for all school staff, especially those who serve as members of the CST. It is recommended that this self-identification occur throughout the year; an ideal time could be aligned with formal or informal observations. Part of this reflection could include teachers' perceptions of how they are meeting the needs of students with ASD in their classrooms and what tools/resources are still needed to do so effectively.

Additionally, administrators should include teachers in the decision-making process and increase the notion of an authentic inclusion setting by providing teachers with the training, time, and resources needed to collaborate with the CST effectively. Additionally, school and district leaders should emphasize social skills development as they grow academically to meet the needs of students with ASD. A change in emphasis means that academics should not always be prioritized over social skills in a classroom setting.

Professional development creators, school administrators, and members of the CST should collaborate on an ongoing basis to identify specific PD types that are needed for staff. Choosing effective PD could look like considering the current population of students served in school and ensuring that PD aligns with what is required to meet the needs of those students effectively. Furthermore, feedback and concerns should be heard from all school staff throughout the year assessing the effectiveness of their PD, which should then be used to drive future PD Sessions.

On a societal level, my research may help to identify a known gap in services provided to students with autism and help call for a larger group of advocates who desire change. If changes are made to the way in which teachers are trained to work with students with ASD and the way in which administrators increase the availability of support for teachers, then society may see a positive impact. The impact could then benefit students with ASD and their families by providing more services, increased collaboration between stakeholders, and better preparation for adult living. If adults with ASD are better prepared for adult living, then the attrition rate for students with ASD in the secondary school setting could potentially decrease as noted by Oxley and Bernard, (2019) and Hedley et al. (2019). Alverson et al. (2019) detailed that the unemployment rate may also decrease with additional support and resources in place for adults with ASD. The findings from my study could help to identify the areas of concern that cause the current barriers in place to a successful transition and aid in the creation of more efficient practices and training. With the additional support and resources in place, adults

with ASD may feel as though they are more productive and contributing members of society.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand and examine the perceptions of teachers in NJ regarding implementing social skills within their classrooms. Teachers reported feeling significantly unprepared to work with students with ASD due to reasons such as a lack of knowledge of ASD, inadequate training, insufficient resources, and pressure from their administration to focus on other academic content. The results described a noted gap in practice and research in working with students with ASD.

When students with ASD did not have their needs met in the school setting, they were more likely to face adverse experiences well into adulthood, therefore it is vital that teachers are able to mitigate this concern via the implementation of effective social skills instruction methods. Ineffective social skills instruction was attributed to unsuccessful teacher training and inclusion practices. Teachers reported a need for effective instruction during the school year from their administration, as well as an increase in administrative support and resources to help meet the needs of their students with ASD.

Transitions for students with ASD begins in their preschool years and continues into adulthood. Preparing students with the necessary social skills to navigate the changes in their lives as children and teenagers help to set them up for success as adults. Teachers are an essential component of student success; thus, it is vital that teachers receive effective, ongoing training to improve their practice. In addition to training, teachers also require more resources and administrative support to help prepare their students with

ASD for life after school. Without the needed training, resources and support in place, teachers will continue to feel unprepared to equip their students for their postsecondary school endeavors.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Script to open interview	The purpose of this interview is to increase my understanding of the challenges faced by current educators when implementing social skills within the classroom to students with ASD. I am interested in any factors that may hinder or help your ability to teach social skills to students with ASD while in your classroom. The answers you provide will help to identify potential causes of the challenges faced by educators and themes that present themselves across various locales. This information may help to identify best-practice methods and a need for more support in this area.
Informed consent	I want to remind you again that your identity is confidential. You and your location of employment will be referred to by a pseudonym only. Interviews will be audio-recorded. Your participation is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time.
Purpose of the interview	The purpose of this interview is to answer the research question: How do teachers in New Jersey implement instructional strategies to teach social skills to students with moderate to severe ASD?

	Interview Questions
Demographics and experience	1) Have you taught for at least two years? 2) What is the highest degree you have obtained? 3) What is your gender (male, female, transsexual, prefer not to answer)? 4) What grade and subject level do you teach? 5) What certifications do you currently hold? Both General and Special Education. 6) Have you taught students with ASD? 7) Are you able to answer interview questions via Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom?
Understanding the lived experience of participants	8) How do you rate your ability to effectively collaborate with all stakeholders when it comes to teaching transitional skills to students with ASD? (Not effective, slightly effective, effective, highly effective) 9) Please explain your choice. 10) How do you rate your teacher training in regard to effectively preparing you with the skills needed to teach transitional skills to students with ASD from your teacher education program? (Not effective, slightly effective, effective, highly effective) 11) Please explain your choice. 12) How do you rate your teacher PD training as effectively preparing you with the skills needed to teach transitional skills to students with ASD (Not

effective, slightly effective, effective, highly effective)

13) Please explain your choice.
14) How would you rate your support from administration in implementing social skills within the classroom? (Not effective, slightly effective, effective, highly effective)
15) Please explain your choice.
16) How do you rate your agreement to the following statement, "I feel adequately prepared to teach the transitional and social skills needed to students with ASD in order to ensure success in their postsecondary school endeavor" (Highly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, highly agree)
17) Please explain your choice.
18) What social skills do you believe are most important for teaching students with ASD the transitional skills needed?
19) How do you teach those social skills?
20) Do you feel that you have the necessary resources and training to implement the social skills you mentioned above?
21) What academic skills do you believe are most important for teaching students with ASD the transitional skills needed?
22) How do you teach those academic skills?
23) Do you feel that you have adequate resources and training to implement the transitional academic and social skills mentioned above?

24) How would you rate your current ability to be an effective member of an IEP team as it relates to the establishment of transitional goals, services, and resources? (Not confident at all, somewhat confident, confident, very confident)
25) Please explain your choice.
26) During IEP meetings how much input would you say you give? (Very little, little, the same at other members, a little bit more than other members, substantial more than other members).
27) How confident do you feel in your ability to meet the transitional needs outlined in a student's IEP? (Not confident at all, somewhat confident, confident, very confident)
28) Please your choice.
29) What do you perceive as being the biggest barrier that you face in teaching students with ASD transitional skills?
30) Do you feel you have adequate time to collaborate with all members of an IEP team concerning students in your class?
31) Can you please expand on your answer?
32) Do you feel that you have adequate time to incorporate social skills instruction during your academic?
33) How often do you receive ASD specific PD within a school year?
34) Is this PD conducted by school personnel or outside agency?

35) If this is offered by an outside agency, who conducts follow-up training?
36) Does your in-service PD offer chances to practice and model skills taught?
37) How often do you have the opportunity to observe best practice techniques for working with students with ASD in another classroom or setting?
38) How do you rate the availability of resources within your school to implement transitional aspects of a student's IEP? (none available, somewhat available, available as needed, available all the time, more than available)
39) Please explain your choice.
40) Do you feel as though you are a part of the decision-making process within your school when it comes to implementing social and academic programs for students with IEPs?
41) What resources or tools do you believe that you still need to be able to meet the social skills for students with ASD?
42) In a given week, how often do you receive feedback on your instructional practice for students with disabilities from either an administrator or coach?
43) How is this feedback progressed monitored?
44) Is there anything else not mentioned that you feel would be beneficial to know for this study?

Script to close the interview	Thank you for your help with my study. I appreciate your time in effort in helping me to explore my research question. I just want to remind you once again that your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw consent at any time, even after the interview process. Please contact me with any questions or concerns you may have. I will email the gift card to the email address provided to me in you interest survey, Before I end this interview, do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time.